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# Worker Voices in Construction

In-depth research with  
construction workers



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**Prepared for:** Director of Labour Market Enforcement

Disclaimer:

This report represents independent research that was commissioned by the Director of Labour Market Enforcement in February 2020, to inform his Annual Strategy 2020/21.

Fieldwork took place in March 2020, during the very early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and prior to its full impact on the labour market. Nevertheless, issues raised in this research continue to be pertinent and provide an important insight into worker voices in this sector

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official views, policy or position of the Director or any agency of HM Government.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background

The construction industry is a growing sector. Between 2014 and 2016, 2.2 million UK residents were working in the industry<sup>1</sup>, and this number is projected to rise to 2.77 million by 2022<sup>2</sup>. Construction has been identified as a high-risk sector for labour market exploitation by the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), with known violations in relation to pay, hours, health and safety, employment status and living conditions.

This report presents case illustrations and a summary of key themes from research commissioned by the Director of Labour Market Enforcement (DLME) to explore experiences of working in the construction industry today. The accounts given in this research are intended to inform the evidence base for the DLME's 2020/21 annual strategy. This research, alongside three complementary studies on the agriculture, social care and hand car wash sectors, capture the stories and perspectives of workers in sectors at risk of exploitation.

## 1.2 Research aims

This research aims to better understand worker experiences of the construction industry, a sector identified as having a high risk of worker exploitation and labour market non-compliance. The insights generated from the real-life examples in this research will be used to inform the DLME's 2020/21 annual strategy. The findings will complement evidence gathered elsewhere by the DLME to develop a fuller picture of the experiences of the population. The Director intends for this work to help shape further comprehensive research into assessing the scale and nature of non-compliance.

## 1.3 Methods

This research adopted a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews to explore the lives and employment circumstances of ten construction workers. Table 1.1 below shows the characteristics of the participants of this research. The sample sought to include current construction workers in trading and labouring occupations. In addition, focused efforts were made to identify participants with a mix of the following characteristics:

- **Employment status:** employed and self-employed
- **Nationality:** British and non-British nationals<sup>3</sup>
- **Industry:** domestic and commercial

The participants of this research were recruited in one of three ways. 51 British Social Attitudes survey<sup>4</sup> respondents, who self-identified as working in construction, were invited to take part. Five participants were recruited in this way. A specialist recruitment agency was then enlisted, and this led to four participants being recruited. The third approach was 'snowballing', whereby existing

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<sup>1</sup> ONS (2018) [Migrant labour force within the UK's construction industry: August 2018](#)

<sup>2</sup> Sonnichsen (2019) [Construction Industry in the UK - Statistics & Facts](#)

<sup>3</sup> It was only possible to interview one non-British construction worker due to the recruitment challenges mentioned on page 2. The experiences of the non-British worker interviewed must not be interpreted as being representative of all migrant workers.

<sup>4</sup> [NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey](#) is a nationally representative annual survey about people's social, political and moral attitudes.

participants were asked to promote the research among their networks. One participant was recruited in this way. Each participant received a payment of £40 as a token of thanks.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Industry</b>	<b>Employer size</b>	<b>Employment status</b>	<b>Part of larger supply chain</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
1. Marius	Domestic	Micro (1-9)	Employee	No	Romanian
2. Steve	Residential / commercial	Medium (50-249)	Employee	No	British
3. Kenny	Residential (public sector contractor)	Medium (50-249)	Self-employed (agency worker)	Yes	British
4. Noah	Industrial	Large (250+)	Employee	Yes	British
5. Patrick	Commercial	Small (10-49)	Employee	No	British
6. Jason	Residential / commercial	Medium (50-249)	Self-employed	Yes	British
7. Stuart	Commercial	Small (10-49)	Employee	No	British
8. Danny	Commercial (public sector contractor)	Micro (1-9)	Self-employed	No	British
9. Amy	Residential / commercial	Small (10-49)	Employee (0 hours contract)	No	British
10. Lee	Commercial (public sector)	Small (10-49)	Self-employed (sole trader)	No	British

Recruitment and data collection took place between 21<sup>st</sup> February and 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020, which coincided with the early stages of the UK COVID-19 outbreak and the UK lockdown, introduced on 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020. The pandemic had a minor impact on recruitment: ‘social distancing’ cut short face-to-face recruitment, which was intended to target under-represented groups. In addition, the implications of social distancing measures on job security and income generation may have been the cause for previously willing contacts to become unresponsive. These issues posed barriers to the recruitment of additional migrant workers and workers based in London.

The interviews took place by telephone and lasted up to an hour each. All interviews were conducted in English. A topic guide was used to explore key themes in the interviews. The interviews first collected background information about participants’ lives before exploring motivations for working in construction, work histories, details of current work and entitlements and experiences of reporting or seeking information and guidance about workplace issues.

The data generated in the interviews were analysed using a case- and theme-based approach to analysis. Each interview was recorded, and researchers summarised findings under a list of key interview themes in an analytical grid, with verbatim quotes to illustrate key points. Using these results, researchers developed ‘case illustrations’ – short summaries of each participant’s account – and then analysed the results together to compare and contrast experiences and draw out cross-cutting themes.

The aim of this small-scale study is not to generate findings that are exhaustive or representative of the experiences of all UK construction workers, but to explore issues in-depth within the individual contexts of a small number of individuals. This report avoids giving numerical findings, since qualitative research is not designed to build a statistically representative sample and cannot support numerical analysis.

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## 1.4 Content of the report

What follows in this report are ten individual case illustrations for each participating construction worker, and a summary of overarching themes. Verbatim quotations are used to illuminate findings and are labelled with details of participants' workplaces and demographic characteristics. To protect the anonymity of research participants, each person has been given a pseudonym and some details have been altered.

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## 2. Case illustrations

# Marius



**Painter and decorator**  
**5 years in construction**  
**Employee**  
**Workplace of 1-9 workers**



**Romanian male, age 28, Aberdeen**

Marius lives with his partner and three young children in Aberdeen. He has worked in construction since moving to the UK in 2015. He previously worked as an estate agent in Romania. He says he moved to the UK for a better life, work and education but misses family in Romania.

Marius works full time as a painter and decorator for residential properties. He works in a team of five, which includes one team leader. He has worked for the same employer since moving to the UK. One of his teammates is also Romanian and helped him to get the job.

Since starting in this role, he has learned English, and before that his Romanian friend would translate for him. He initially found it difficult living in a new country without knowing the language, but said he adjusted after a few months.

Marius does not hold any official qualifications or certification and has not heard of the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS). His current employer has taught him everything he knows about construction.

“I’ve been working for this company since I came, so they know me completely. I started from knowing nothing to knowing everything now.”

Marius says he has never experienced any issues in the workplace and that his conditions are never unsafe. He always has the right tools, which are provided by his employer.

He gets on very well with his team, and he says they are like a family to him. They carpool to work every day and spend time together outside of work.

“That’s probably the best thing about the job, that we work in a very good team and we know each other and it’s always helpful to have someone around that you can trust to do the right job.”

Marius is aware that support is out there, but if he did experience any issues, and couldn’t resolve them by speaking to his employer, he would simply leave his job, so as not to cause any trouble.

“I think there are people that deal with this kind of stuff [external support] . . . but probably I wouldn’t look for any trouble, I would just try to sort it the best I could, to not cause any trouble or anything but at the end of the day if you’re not happy somewhere you just find another job.”

His future in the UK construction industry is currently uncertain, due to Britain’s exit from the EU. If he can remain in the UK, he wishes to continue in his current role and aspires to run his own business in painting and decorating one day.

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# Steve



**Bathroom installation**  
**38 years in construction**  
**Employee**  
**Workplace of 50-249 workers**



**British male, age 60, Somerset**

Steve lives in Somerset with his partner. Prior to entering the construction sector, Steve had various jobs, including farming and agricultural roles.

Steve started his career in construction in the early 80s when a friend informed him that a groundworker job was available for a building company, and no qualifications were required. Steve worked in this job for ten years before he was made redundant. He then did casual painting and decorating work.

For the past 20 years, Steve has been employed by a housing association. He installs bathrooms and uses a range of skills including painting and decorating, tiling, plumbing and carpentry. In this role, he obtained a City & Guilds qualification in painting and decorating, and undertook a basic course in plumbing.

Steve's employers pay for his travel, tools and clothing and provide Personal Protective Equipment. He gets 30 days holiday and enhanced sick pay. Steve is required to work 40 hours a week but would prefer to work fewer. He is 'seeing his time out' until he reaches retirement, which is approaching. In the past he was required to be on call for urgent bathroom repairs for 24 hours each week, until he stopped due to feeling burnt out.

"I used to do a 24-hour call-out which was absolutely tiring ... You used to be on call from half past four to eight o'clock in the morning [...] Sometimes you used to get a call at two o'clock in the morning."

The company pays time and a half for overtime, but he prefers not to do any. As a large company, his employers can accommodate this preference. He feels he has flexibility and autonomy over his work – for example, in the earlier stages of the UK Coronavirus outbreak, he declined a job for someone who was feeling unwell, with full support from his employers.

With regards to health and safety, a panic button system is in place for lone workers going into people's properties. However, while Steve generally feels safe at work, he has experienced incidents in the past when his concerns about staff safety in relation to servicing specific addresses were not listened to by his employer.

Steve is a member of the union and would approach them for information on employee rights and entitlements. He cannot recall reporting any issues. However, he feels that in disputes involving tenants, his employer will support tenants over employees for financial reasons.

"I think personally some of these housing associations don't listen to their workers sometimes. I think personally they agree with the tenant more than what they do with the workers because obviously the tenants are paying their rent."

Steve thinks that his employer should provide more support to staff in these circumstances. He would also welcome more flexibility in working hours for those who are approaching retirement age.



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# Kenny



**Bricklayer**  
**40 years in construction**  
**Self-employed agency worker**  
**Workplace of 50-249 workers**



**British male, age 57, Wolverhampton**

Kenny lives on his own in Wolverhampton. When he is not working, he spends most of his time with friends, typically at one of the local pubs. He first started working as a labourer in the early 80s and spent the next few years doing bricklaying jobs and gaining qualifications in carpentry and bricklaying.

Kenny's next job was for a construction company, where he worked for 20 years. He enjoyed this job but decided to leave because he felt he wasn't being paid enough and because his employer said he did not intend to pay for his retirement package.

He says that conditions were generally good, but upon reflection, he can think of numerous times in which he felt unsafe. He speculated that this was usually due to cost-cutting.

“There's loads of times actually, come to think of it. Loads of jobs where you're told you need proper scaffolding and you won't get it, cause it's too expensive . . . money, money. [...] they'll have you working off a ladder, it won't cost them anything then.”

Kenny decided to leave this job and recently started working as a self-employed agency worker. The agency gave him the choice of being employed or self-employed. He chose to be self-employed because he thought the pay would be better and because this would allow him to leave a job quickly if he wanted to.

Kenny's first job as a self-employed agency worker was to make structural adaptations to retirement homes. He said it was essentially a zero-hours contract, as he was often laid off due to bad weather. He left this job because the work was too unreliable and affected his ability to generate a stable and adequate income.

“Every time it rained they said don't come in. [...] when you've got bills to pay. I was struggling. For the last week he had no work for me at all. For me it was like a zero-hours contract.”

Kenny has now moved on and enjoys his current job. It involves room conversions in residential buildings. Health and safety measures are implemented fully and as a self-employed agency worker he is required to hold various certifications, including a CSCS card.

Kenny used Acas a few times in his first role and is aware that there is a similar service available for agency workers. In his current role, he would report any issues directly to his supervisor, but would be reluctant to seek external help because if the agency got shut down, he would be out of work.

Whilst he can feel himself beginning to slow down, Kenny would like to keep working in construction for as long as possible because he really enjoys the work. He may consider working as an 'improver', as this is less physically demanding.

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# Noah



**Mining construction**  
**43 years in construction**  
**Employee**  
**Workplace of 250+ workers**



**British male, age 55, Middlesbrough**

Noah first trained as an apprentice after leaving school in the 1970s and has gained numerous qualifications in construction since. He has had a variety of construction jobs in mining, roofing, bridges and flood defences. He is currently employed by a large company that provides construction services. He manages a small team and they carry out repair and maintenance work on a mine.

Noah does not live locally to his place of work, so he privately rents a flat on weekdays. This accommodation is not provided by his employer, but his employer reimburses his travel between work and home.

He is entitled to statutory sick pay and 22 days' holiday plus statutory holidays; however, if Noah wants any extra holiday, his employer is willing to accommodate this. Noah has opted out of the European Working Time Directive and often works 12 hours a day. He is paid 1.5-2 times the standard rate for overtime. Although he works overtime willingly, he says there is some pressure to work extra hours.

“Sometimes you feel obliged, but it is out of choice.”

Noah has never experienced any pay issues with his employer. In the mines, the working conditions can be dusty. However, Noah feels that the staff have all the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) needed to protect them against risks, such as silicosis or emphysema from the dusty conditions.

Noah generally feels safe in his role. He has the autonomy to decline a job that is unsafe and feels fully supported by his employer in doing this:

“If it's not fit to work in, we don't go in, end of. It's not the same as working in an office, it's construction. We do our best to make the best of a bad surrounding, really.”

Noah has been unionised all his working life. Whenever he has experienced a work-related issue, he has consulted his union. However, he thinks trade unions are weaker than they used to be:

“You get a situation where the workers don't stand together and then it's man-eat-man. If one man won't go and do it, another one probably would. When I was brought up in the mines, if one said they wasn't doing it, nobody did it – because we got the backing of the union.”

Overall, Noah is happy in his current role, though he would like a higher level of pay. The job offers variety, and staff morale is strong. In addition, he considers that mining conditions have improved significantly over the years:

“The conditions have improved tenfold.”

Noah hopes to continue working for a few more years before retiring.

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# Patrick



**Remedial works**  
**17 years in construction**  
**Employee**  
**Workplace of 10-49 workers**



**British male, 40s, Great Yarmouth**

Patrick lives on his own in Great Yarmouth. When he is not working, he spends time visiting friends. Patrick's father was a painter and decorator and he would help him out growing up.

After achieving a degree in Industrial Design, he couldn't find work in this field, so he retrained as a bricklayer and gained his NVQ2 in construction. He then worked for his brother as a bricklayer for ten years and has worked in various construction jobs since.

Patrick then worked for a concrete specialist for five years. He was first attracted to the job by the high standard of work, however, these standards were not upheld. Onsite, there was no hot water, washing facilities, nowhere to eat or heat up food and he often felt unsafe.

“There was nowhere to eat your food, you basically had to eat in your car. If you wanted the toilet, you had to use a bucket.”

He signed a written contract on starting the job, but it was immediately amended, and he was never given access to it again. His pay was withheld 2-3 times. He felt there was no way of reporting these issues as the contractor was the sole manager, and staff were made to feel their jobs were at threat if they complained.

He thought too many staff were employed at the site. CSCS checks were not enforced and the quality of equipment, PPE and building materials were poor. He frequently had to use his own tools.

“Rather than being industrial, good equipment, that'd be [...] cheap equipment that wouldn't last [...] if you didn't have your own personal equipment you were basically bugged. And he made you feel guilty for not having your own equipment.”

Patrick injured his leg due to health and safety procedures not being followed, and this injury continues to affect him. He has taken the employer to court in relation to this.

“There was one job where we were working where I had me accident, where I'm surprised there hasn't been anyone killed. [...] we were not trained scaffolders but we were forced into the position of taking this scaffold down... [...] and that was about 90 foot up.”

Patrick currently carries out remedial works on historic buildings. He is part of a 12-person team, with support from an office-based team. He has never felt unsafe at work; health and safety procedures are followed fully, everyone requires a CSCS card and risk assessments are carried out before every job. PPE and tools are provided by an external company. He has access to full washing facilities and a canteen.

Relations with his employer are good, he is always paid on time and has enhanced sick pay. There is a clear procedure for reporting health and safety, and other issues. Patrick feels his employer is very supportive; mental health training is offered alongside first aid training. He is happy in this job and feels much better supported than in his previous job.

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“It's like being in a different world. We've got a canteen where we can heat food up, we can make a hot drink, we can shower, we can use the toilet.”

In the coming years, Patrick aspires to developing and then selling his new property. His work aspirations are to specialise in restorative work, or to become an assessor, as this is less physically demanding.

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# Jason



**Bricklayer**  
**5 years in construction**  
**Self-employed**  
**Workplace of 50-249 workers**



**British male, age unknown, Birmingham**

Jason initially wanted to become a policeman. However, when he left school, the police service was not due to recruit, so Jason decided to develop a trade instead. With encouragement from his parents, Jason has committed to a career in bricklaying because he enjoys building new structures.

Jason gained a Level 3 NVQ in bricklaying at college and has a CSCS card. Whilst at college, Jason was placed with a small building company. The company decided to keep Jason on as an employee after he completed his placement. He describes safe working conditions in this role.

“We always had to have full PPE, gloves, hat, vis vest. You got your goggles when you’re using certain equipment.”

After a few years, Jason joined a company that serviced council properties. Jason found this job, which he stayed in for just over a year, less rewarding because it did not involve building new structures.

In the role, Jason accidentally injured his arm and hand due to missing safety mechanisms on some equipment he was using. He described receiving excellent personal support from his managers following the accident. However, he wasn’t paid while he was off and has filed a legal claim in relation to this.

While in this job, a subcontractor told Jason about a better paid, self-employed job opportunity, involving the external renovation of the flats, which Jason took up. For the past year, Jason has been working in this role, which has involved cladding removal, re-insulation and creating window openings, which he has been enjoying.

Jason’s standard hours are 8:00am-4:00pm, and he is paid for any overtime he does at the standard hourly rate. On some occasions, Jason has not been able to work due to unsafe weather conditions, and this has resulted in lost earnings. The work has otherwise been regular until recently; he is now temporarily out of work due to the Coronavirus outbreak.

Jason is provided with high-quality personal protective equipment by the subcontractor and generally feels safe.

“80% of the time [health and safety] is perfect, [...] There are mistakes that are made now and again [...] But when you do go into a job, all aspects have been looked over [...] There’s risk assessments and everything made before a job’s carried out.”

If Jason needed any information around his work-related rights, he would contact Citizens Advice. He has not needed to report any issues in his current position. However, if he did, he would speak to Human Resources, which has a dedicated staff support centre, and his supervisor.

Jason does occasional self-employed work on the weekends. He aspires to have his own business doing private work in the future, eventually becoming a subcontractor and taking on bigger contracts.

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# Stuart



**Carpenter and joiner**  
**7 years in construction**  
**Employed**  
**Workplace of 10-49 workers**



**British male, age 38, Manchester**

Stuart lives in Manchester with his partner and four children. Before entering the construction sector, he worked in office-based roles. He decided to move into construction because he is skilled with his hands and likes to keep active, which construction work allows him to do.

Stuart found work in construction through a friend who owns a property company, and still works there now. Initially, Stuart was responsible for procuring construction materials and products, and assisting skilled workers. However, after completing NVQs in carpentry and joinery, he took on more skilled site work. Stuart tends to work on commercial building construction sites and his daily tasks include snagging, fitting kitchens, making fixtures, doing fittings for doors, firestopping and painting work.

He has a good working relationship with his employer based on their friendship, gets on well with his colleagues and enjoys the atmosphere, which he describes as relaxed and friendly. The working conditions are very good from a health and safety perspective: injuries rarely happen, but where they occur, they are addressed immediately. In addition, Stuart describes having autonomy over his working arrangements, which he has earned through gaining more experience.

“I have quite a lot [of say over my working arrangements] ... What projects I’m working on, who I work with ... I have a lot of freedom to choose because I’ve earned the right to dictate my own work conditions and who I’m with.”

Stuart is paid on a weekly basis. However, on a couple of occasions, Stuart has voluntarily waited longer to be paid when the company has had cashflow issues.

“There were a couple of times when [my employer] was having to pay eight suppliers money and money was a bit tight, and I said, ‘Do you know what – pay me at the end of the month rather than weekly,’ and it worked out.”

Stuart works for as long as is required in order to complete jobs and does not receive paid overtime. He is not unionised and is currently unaware of his benefits and entitlements as an employee. Stuart has never had to report any work-related issues, but if the need arose, he would look online for information about reporting. Overall, Stuart enjoys his role and feels well-supported.

In his spare time, Stuart does small-scale ‘side work’ for people locally. He would like to do more of this over time and eventually give up his day job to work exclusively for himself.

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# Danny



**Bricklayer**  
**49 years in construction**  
**Self-employed**  
**Workplace of 1-9 workers**



**British male, age 65, Stockport**

Danny lives with his wife in Stockport, where he has lived for 40 years. He has worked as a bricklayer for all his adult life. He has stayed in construction because he enjoys being outside, keeping fit and meeting people in the sector.

At the beginning of his career in the 1970s, Danny undertook a five-year apprenticeship as a bricklayer with the council, working on council houses, and then stayed on as an employee for five years. He left the council to establish a building company with a family member. After ten years, Danny's relative retired and the partnership ended.

Danny then worked in Manchester as a self-employed bricklayer, visiting different building sites in the area to find jobs. After 25-30 years, Danny decided that he no longer wanted to take on extensive jobs on building sites because it was too physically demanding.

For the last ten years Danny has worked on a self-employed basis for small building companies. For the past year, Danny has been working for a company which does a lot of work for the council in buildings such as schools and fire stations. This company is owned by a friend whom Danny has worked with intermittently for 40 years. Danny enjoys the varied nature, and the proximity, of the work.

Danny's personal protective equipment is provided by the company. In order to take on council work, the company is required to meet health and safety criteria stipulated by the council, so the working conditions are good.

“The scaffolding that you go on is really good and the protective clothing he gives you is good and you just feel safe ...”

Danny describes his work as relatively unstable, being self-employed. However, as he is financially secure, this is outweighed by the freedom and autonomy he enjoys over his working arrangements, including working hours and holidays.

“He brings you in when he needs you and he gets rid of you when the work's gone ... And you accept that because you want the freedom. You want to be able to take your holidays when you want your holidays and not when he's telling you ...”

Though Danny has experienced issues with pay in previous jobs, no such issues have arisen in his current role. He has never reported a work-related issue; however, if he were to do so he would report to a senior colleague. Danny is not unionised and considers that, aside from rest breaks, he does not have any rights or entitlements around work as a self-employed worker.

“I have no rights whatsoever. I've never thought of having any rights, myself, personally – self-employed.”

Danny would change nothing about his current role, describing it as one of the best jobs he has ever had. He would like to stay working in this position for as long as his health allows.



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# Amy



**Painter and decorator**  
**10 years in construction**  
**Employee**  
**Workplace of 10-49 workers**



**British female, 33, Bury**

Amy lives with her partner and their three children. Growing up, she used to work weekends at her father's painting and decorating company. After first working for a retailer, she gradually started to work full-time for her father.

**"I didn't necessarily want to do that. I just fell into it."**

Initially, Amy carried out general labouring work in painting and decorating. For the last five years she's been working in a managerial role, overseeing a small team of 9-15 people who carry out painting and decorating work on new-build houses. From time to time, Amy does physical painting and decorating work if specialist techniques are required.

For the last 12 months, she has voluntarily worked a zero-hour contract. She generally works between 20 and 40 hours a week, as she chooses. This offers her the flexibility to fit work around her children.

She is trained in several interior design and painting techniques and holds a CSCS card. At work, risk assessments are carried out before every contract and health and safety team briefings are held weekly. Her employer supplies tools and personal protective equipment to each worker and she has always felt safe.

Amy enjoys her job but says that, working in a male-dominated industry, she is occasionally subject to a lack of respect and sexist comments, but never from her immediate colleagues (her father's employees). She has always felt capable of dealing with this herself and has never reported issues regarding sexism, or other issues such as health and safety.

**"Being a female worker in an all-male environment, you've got to be a little bit bold at times cause there are sometimes comments or just general sexism basically. Not as much as you used to, and it was a lot worse when I first started, people know they don't get away with it much now, either legally or off me in general!"**

Her father's company is a subcontractor to a larger company. If she felt she needed to report an issue, she would go to the HR department of the main contractor. In the industry more widely, she highlights the need for more equality and diversity.

Amy aspires to set up her own bespoke interior design business in the next few years.

**"I like to follow the trends in the industry and create new things for people, and for myself as well really, I enjoy it [...] it would be completely different, it would be individuals' homes as opposed to large sites where you don't get to meet the end user at all and they don't get a say in the decor."**



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# Lee



**Company director**  
**47 years in construction**  
**Self-employed sole trader**  
**Workplace of 10-49 workers**



**British male, 66, Bolton**

Lee lives with his wife, daughter and granddaughter in Bolton. He is the company director, operating as a sole trader, of a construction business originally set up by his father. He first trained in the chemical industry but decided to work for his father in his early twenties, as he found the work more interesting.

Lee oversees a team of 15 employees, which includes one office-based person and various tradespeople. He spends most of his time directing his employees onsite. All his current work comes from a local authority and involves the refurbishment of public buildings and homes. He typically works around 40 hours a week, or more when weekend work is needed. He is paid directly by the local authority, and this money is distributed to his employees through the company accountant. As a sole trader, he is not aware of any employment rights of his own, but he says his employees receive statutory entitlements in relation to pay, overtime and leave.

The local authority holds him to very high health and safety standards. Toilet and canteen facilities are always provided to employees, if not onsite then through cabin hire. When accommodation is needed, Lee will provide this off-site, through hotels. Security fencing and personal protective equipment must always be provided, and recently this has included additional masks and gloves, in light of the Coronavirus outbreak. Every job is risk assessed before it begins, and he has never felt unsafe onsite. He doesn't require CSCS cards from his employees, but they are required to undertake extensive health and safety training.

“All my employees have to go on courses. Courses for scaffolding towers, courses for working on high level roofs, courses for working underneath buildings. [...] I have to comply to all the legal requirements and regulations [...] you make the workplace as safe as possible.”

When Lee experiences issues with his own employees, he deals with them informally. He is signed up with NatWest Mentor, an employment law and HR service, which he would use to deal with any serious issues, but none have arisen so far.

The biggest issues Lee faces as a sole trader include the variability in cashflow and the challenges of competing against larger companies. Lee has observed significant changes to the construction industry since starting. This includes advancements in both health and safety and employee wages, but also a decrease in the quality of materials. If there's one thing he would change about his line of work, it would be to improve the provision of apprenticeship schemes for small companies.

“There isn't the same sort of help [for smaller companies]. So you tend not to get as many apprentices, which will have a massive effect going forwards, on the number of trained people in the construction industry.”

Lee aspires to see his business become registered as a limited company this year, before passing the business on to his employees or selling it within the next five years.

# 3. Summary of key themes

This section summarises the key overarching themes from the research. It concludes with a summary of participants' suggestions for how the experiences of construction workers could be improved.

## 3.1 Attitudes towards working in construction

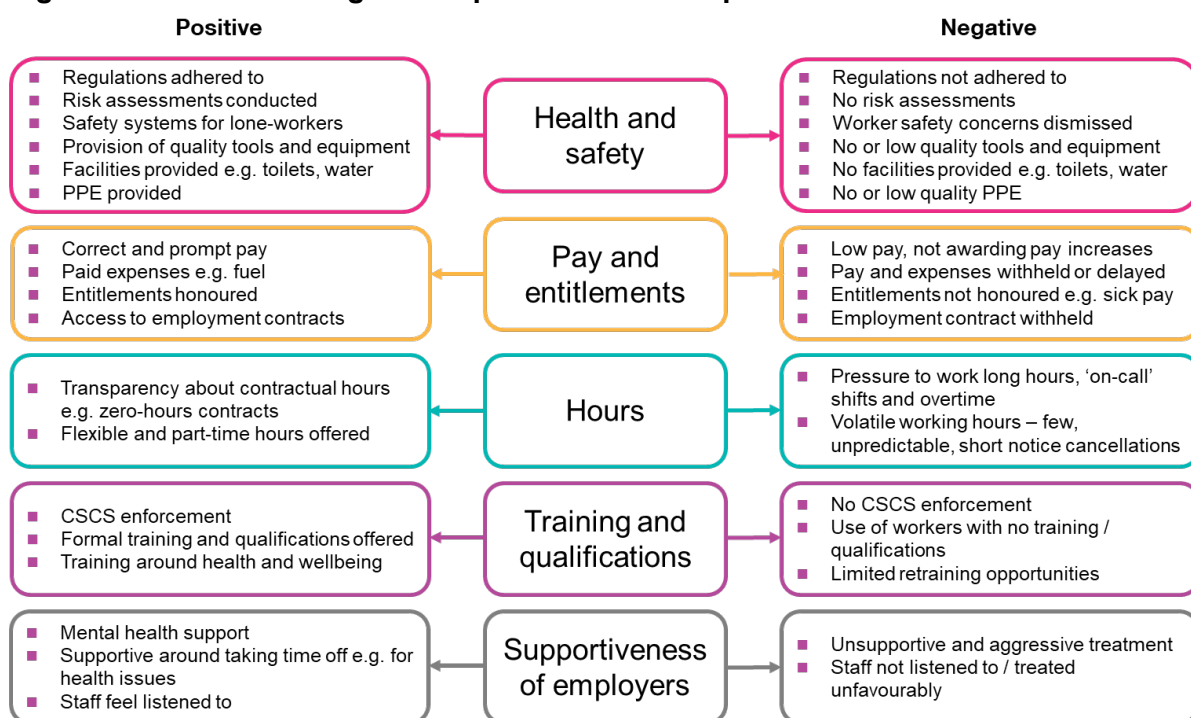
Both positive and negative accounts of working in construction were given, with experiences varying from job to job. It was nonetheless clear that participants enjoyed working in construction and took pride in their work. Working in construction offered the ability to work outdoors, to be active and keep fit and to be creative and learn a range of trades. Participants also spoke highly of strong staff morale and camaraderie in enhancing their experience of work.

Participants' feelings of job satisfaction were evidenced in their future ambitions, with participants intending to remain in construction. Younger participants aspired to further develop specialisms and work for themselves. Those approaching retirement age planned to see out their working lives in their current jobs, though with some hope of gradually reducing their hours or moving into less strenuous roles.

## 3.2 Workplace issues

Rather than the nature of the work itself, it appeared that wider working conditions and relationships influenced whether or not participants had positive or negative experiences. As illustrated in the diagram below, five key issues underpinned either positive or negative experiences of work: health and safety, pay and entitlements, working hours, training and qualifications, and supportiveness of employers.

**Figure 1 Positive and negative experiences of workplace issues**



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Issues around safety, hours and equality and diversity were recurring themes in the interviews and presented particular challenges:

### **Safety**

The risks posed by the absence or use of poor-quality tools and equipment (for example scaffolding and harnesses) and protective wear (for example masks, hard hats and safety shoes) were emphasised. 'Rushing' and 'cutting corners' were also considered to pose safety risks. Participants believed cost-saving lay behind these practices and suggested that small companies in particular were prone to such behaviour.

"All the time it's money, they don't wanna fork out so many hundred pound for extra scaffolding" (Kenny, self-employed, medium employer, age 57)

"A cap on these small companies who are out to make a quick buck so to speak, by cutting corners and putting their men at risk. I did a job where there'd been four fatalities where the HSE had been involved, basically because they were cutting corners and rushing. So that's got to be enforced far stronger than what it is now." (Patrick, employee, small employer, age 40s)

Concerns were raised about the use of underqualified and inexperienced workers. Not only was this thought to pose safety risks, but the willingness of untrained staff to carry out work without adequate safety provisions put pressure on trained workers to do the same or be viewed unfavourably in comparison.

"There was people working there and they hadn't been on a building site in their lives and I don't think they realised the dangers that were involved [...] They're [employers] so keen to get people on the site that they'll look the other way [...] so I do think the CSCS card is important." (Patrick)

"There was a bit of pressure on us because he made me look bad for not doing it. Me not doing it made me look like a trouble-maker even though that was the law." (Patrick)

In contrast, stricter requirements for full certification and training were described by self-employed agency workers and those working for public sector contractors.

### **Hours**

Pressure to work long hours posed an issue, particularly for older workers on large-scale commercial sites. In contrast, self-employed workers, those doing domestic jobs and those working for friends and family had more autonomy over their hours.

"They're brilliant. They're what I want. 8:30-3:45 finish. Home for 4pm. There's no real overtime." (Danny, self-employed, micro employer, age 65)

## Equality and diversity

Negative attitudes towards, and the treatment of women and migrant workers were reported to persist in the construction industry by the only female participant of the research. However, she noted that the situation for women had improved in the past decade as a result of equalities legislation.

"Just the odd comment and things like 'well, she's a woman' or 'show off' but it's not as bad as it used to be." (Amy, employee, small employer, age 33)

"I don't think they [migrant workers] get as much respect sometimes, as they should do really. I think some people feel that they take jobs off people."  
(Amy)

## 3.3 Experiences of specific groups

Three groups emerged as having particularly distinctive experiences and views; self-employed workers, those working for family and friends and older workers:

- Motivations for being **self-employed** included better pay, greater autonomy over jobs and hours and the ability to quickly leave a job. These benefits were seen to outweigh the risks of job instability, loss of earnings (for example due to ill-health) and more limited work-related rights. The benefits of self-employment were particularly attractive for those who had had negative experiences of being employed, such as low pay, unsafe conditions and unscrupulous employers. Awareness and understanding of the Construction Industry Scheme were limited, and no one interviewed was part of the scheme.
- Family was a key route into construction among participants of this study. Some were still working for family members, having started with casual labouring work on weekends, with this leading to permanent and increasingly managerial roles. Some participants were working for friends, either on an employed or self-employed basis. While **those working for friends and family** were often receiving full and formal entitlements, as well as greater autonomy over roles and hours, some participants had less formal arrangements in place and were willing to accept pay delays to ease cashflow issues as a favour to their friends.
- As discussed above, construction jobs were perceived by **older workers** (those aged 50 plus) to lack the flexibility to allow part-time hours. In addition, reductions in adult learning provision were reported to make retraining and moving into less physically demanding roles more difficult. This issue was also raised by younger participants, who perceived limited options for avoiding labouring work in future. While some older workers had succeeded in refusing overtime and 'on-call' shift patterns, core hours of 40 and more per week remained. It was also notable from the accounts of older workers that their experience and expertise afforded them the authority to decline jobs they perceived as unsafe without reprisal from employers. However, a common view among older workers was that although the construction industry had seen significant improvements in areas such as health and safety, it had also seen a decline in unionisation and collective action, thus weakening worker voices over issues such as hours and safety.

## 3.4 Reporting issues and seeking help

Direct experience of reporting workplace issues was limited among participants of this research. Those who had acted on issues had experienced injuries and pay issues in previous jobs. For example, one participant (see case illustration for Jason) had recently instigated legal action against his former employers after not being paid for a period off work that had resulted from a

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workplace injury. These participants described seeking legal assistance, advice from Acas and support from unions.

If an issue were to arise, those working for larger employers described more formalised internal structures and policies for reporting issues than those working for micro employers. Examples included line management structures and HR departments, through which issues could be reported, and formal workplace procedures for reporting health and safety incidents. Smaller subcontractors of larger firms had the option of reporting issues to the HR department of the contracting firm. In contrast, employees of smaller employers said their only options were to either try to resolve issues directly with management or leave their jobs.

A number of barriers to reporting issues were expressed, even where adequate reporting structures were in place:

- Firstly, where the **employer or 'boss' was responsible** for perceived infringements, workers said they did not know who to report issues to, or worried about losing their job if they either confronted their employer or reported issues externally. For example, a self-employed agency worker had heard of a body 'like Acas but for agencies' but feared that reporting issues to them would result in their agency being shut down.
- A second barrier was the belief that **nothing would be achieved** from reporting an issue because participants thought they would not be believed or listened to by their employer. Some reported past experiences of taking action, for example, via trade unions, but not achieving the desired outcome. Examples were also given of external parties such as architects reporting precarious conditions and employers receiving notices from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), but the situation persisting regardless.
- Thirdly, some participants expressed reluctance to take a complaint further if they could not address it themselves, simply to **avoid 'making trouble'** (see the case illustration for Marius).

Participants' awareness of their rights and entitlements was generally good. Employees had a detailed understanding of their pay, hours, leave and other contractual issues. In comparison, self-employed participants considered themselves to have few or no entitlements, such as sick pay or annual leave, with some arrangements with friends tending to be relatively informal and undefined.

As with reporting issues, experience of seeking information and advice in relation to rights, entitlements and workplace issues was limited. Those with internal workplace structures such as supervision or line management chains, office staff, HR departments, and employee assistance programmes said they would seek advice through these channels if appropriate. Other reported channels for seeking advice included unions, Acas, the HSE, Citizens Advice, or simply looking for information or help online.

## 3.5 Suggestions for improvement

Participants made the following suggestions for addressing the issues they experienced working in the construction industry:

- Clamping down on companies, particularly smaller employers, which implement **cost-cutting practices** that compromise the safety and finances of employees. For example, not investing in PPE and good quality equipment, offering inadequate health and safety training and expecting employees to pay for their own tools and equipment.
- The option of **flexible or part-time hours** for older workers and more options for older workers to move into less physically demanding roles, for example through retraining opportunities.

“I think they could reduce the working hours. Me personally, as you get a little bit older, I think they could reduce them – and if you wanted to maybe stay on with the company or something like that then they could maybe give you a part-time role ...” (Steve, employee, medium employer, age 60)

- An increased emphasis on **apprenticeships and training schemes** to offer more comprehensive training to new entrants in a range of trades. This was considered important both in promoting awareness of safe and competent working practices and addressing perceived shortages of skilled tradespeople in the UK, which was reported to pose issues for smaller employers in finding sufficiently trained workers.
- **Equality and diversity** awareness training for construction workers to improve treatment of women and migrant workers.
- **Statutory sick pay** to be paid at the same rate as standard pay, raised by a participant who had received statutory sick pay for a period of sickness absence resulting from a workplace accident.
- Clarity over work-related implications of the **Coronavirus outbreak**. Although the interviews for this research were carried out before the UK-wide lockdown was implemented, some participants had stopped work and did not yet know if they would be paid and how long they would be off work. In addition, those in management and HR-related roles were unclear about worker rights and entitlements in the context of the outbreak.