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Keeping your construction project on-track in uncertain times
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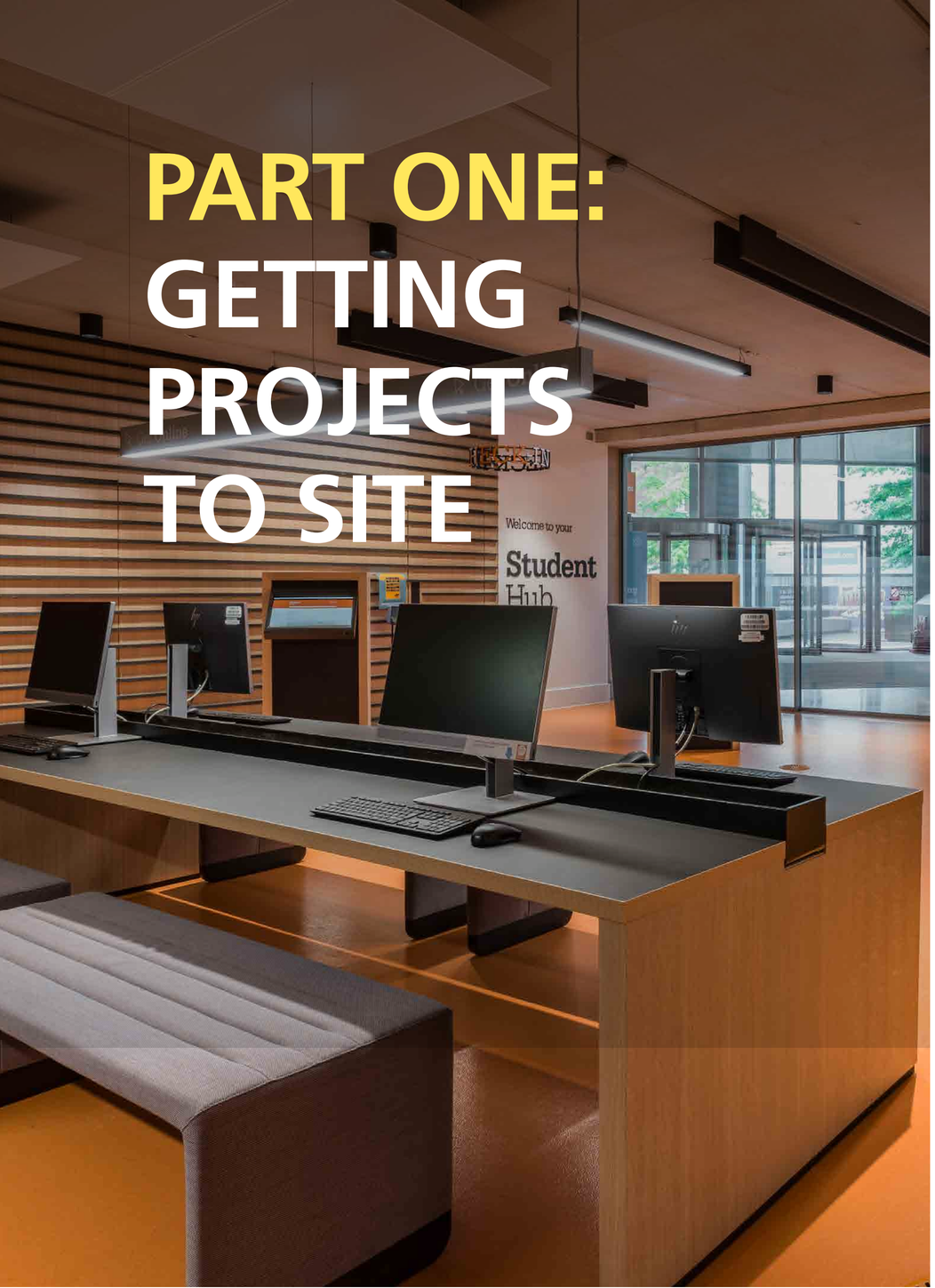
Delivering construction projects effectively during the pandemic has presented a steep learning curve, but the sector has demonstrated great resilience. The way we deliver fit out projects changed overnight. As the situation evolves and challenges continue, we've put our findings together to help our clients.

Part one outlines three important areas to be considered when launching a project. Part two shares five ways to safely deliver a project onsite during the pandemic.



PART ONE: GETTING PROJECTS TO SITE

The fluidity of the current situation means that client requirements and project briefs can change at short notice. In this section we explore how procurement routes, contracts and programming can be used to build in flexibility and mitigate risk for everyone, keeping your project on track.

1.1 Procurement: Traditional, Design and Build or Framework Agreements

Adopting the best procurement route at the start of a project is key to ensuring its success, mitigating risk and alleviating any concerns.

Traditional

This method allows the client to retain ownership of the design for longer, enabling changes and decisions to be made prior to entering into a building contract. An organisation with many stakeholders can use the pre-construction period to ensure the brief is fully formed and understood, the design is complete and approved, and that an accurate level of cost certainty is achieved. This ensures the project is within budget – all before agreeing the terms of a building contract.

However, the process of implementing changes post building contract is longer due to its elongated process and the flow of information. With the pandemic creating a level of uncertainty around the way we live and work, any decisions made during this period may be subject to change.

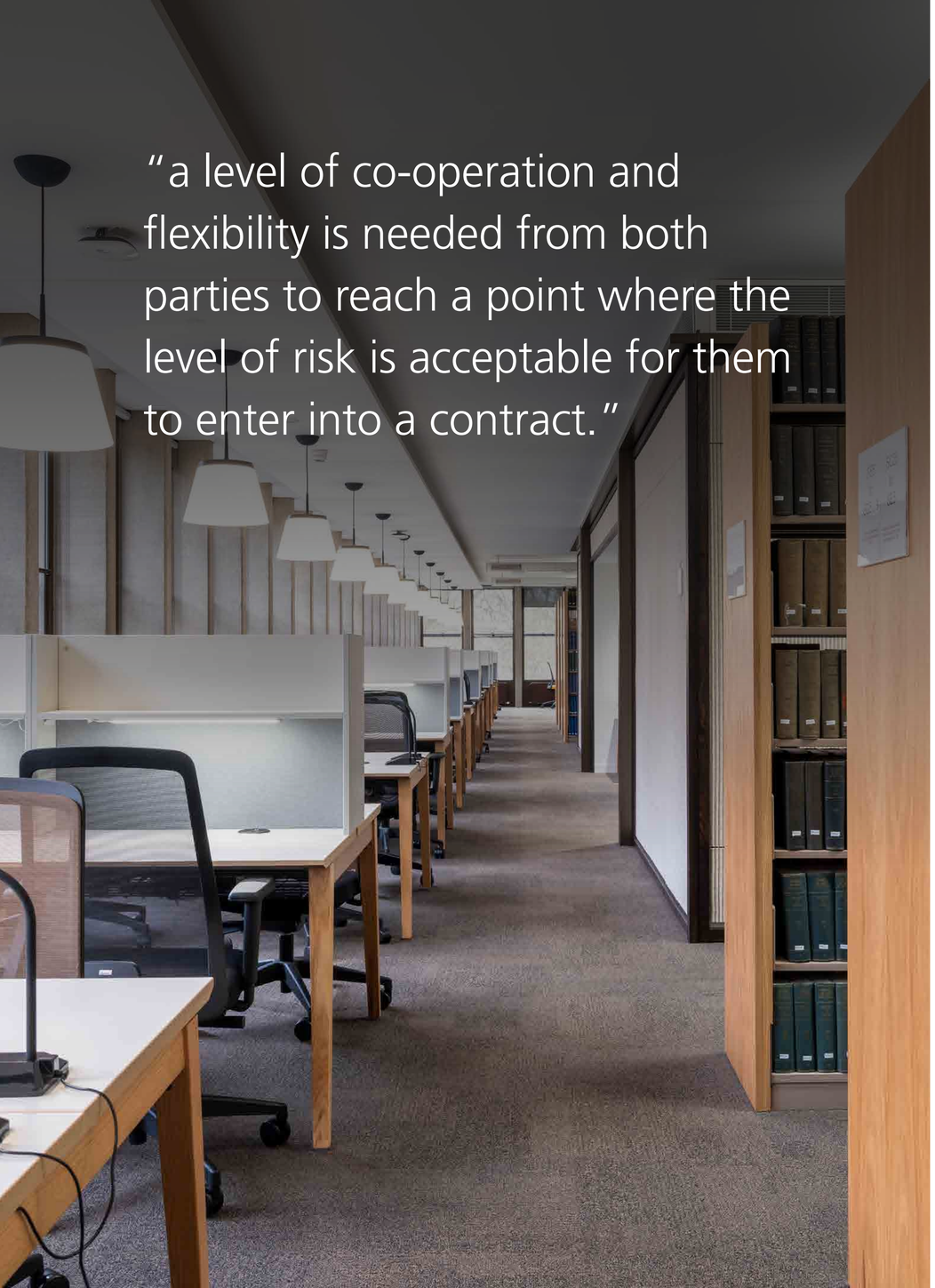
Design and Build

In comparison, Design and Build contracts require earlier contractor involvement, which can improve the design. Risks can be reduced through a Pre-Construction Services Agreement (PCSA), which allows for phased financial commitments with defined break points, or for works to be extended as required.

Once on-site, changes can be implemented quickly, as the contractor has the authority to liaise directly with the supply chain.

Framework Agreements

Public sector framework agreements, such as Pagabo, Scape or SCF, are umbrella agreements negotiated with suppliers on behalf of the public sector. Because so many organisations buy through these types of agreements, prices are competitive. They can provide Higher Education institutions with a quick route to market that removes the need to undertake the costly and time-consuming procurement processes. Frameworks add value to projects with sophisticated structures to implement and measure social value, carbon, Diversity and Inclusion, local spend and apprenticeships.



1.2 Contracts

Covid-19 is likely to have a bearing on construction contracts for years to come. Most contracts contain a provision that place a duty on the contractor to mitigate any delay, however the delay is caused. Contracts are now being developed to specifically define that duty in relation to the pandemic. In reality, a level of co-operation and flexibility is needed from both parties to reach a point where the level of risk is acceptable for them to enter into a contract.

The use of a Pre-Construction Services Agreement (PCSA) before entering into a building contract, combined with break points in the programme and contractual break clauses, enable both parties to mitigate the risk associated with a full-on commitment, while allowing projects to proceed.

Pre-Construction Services Agreements (PCSAs)

A PCSA enables clients to employ contractors to contribute to the design process before the main construction contract begins. This allows the contractor to advise on buildability, sequencing, construction risk, the cost plan, construction programme and the selection of specialist contractors. For the client, a PCSA improves the buildability and cost-certainty of the design, creates a more integrated delivery team, which can help reduce the likelihood of disputes further down the line.

PCSAs can also incorporate the relevant contract provisions required for physical construction work to commence prior to entering into a full building contract. This allows early activities to begin, such as asbestos remediation, surveys and validations, demolition and strip out, procurement of equipment with a long lead-time, and first fix installations. Meanwhile other key decisions can be made before the client commits to a full contract.

Break Clauses

A contract with a break clause enables the client and contractor to continue design and construction activities while limiting the extent of their obligations in a structured way. To accommodate change, natural break points in the design should be highlighted allowing hold points to pause and reassess. This could coincide with:

- Traditional RIBA stages
- Strategic business decisions
- Expected Government or economic announcements
- Completion of a workplace audit or survey

Construction sequencing will then highlight whether the construction programme also lends itself to break points. For example, delivering projects on a floor-by-floor or area-by-area basis.

1.3 Maintaining Project Programmes

On-site productivity has been significantly affected by the pandemic. New Government guidelines around Covid-19 mean that construction programmes have been reviewed to keep everyone safe. The key is detailed project, site, and task-specific planning, together with flexibility and collaboration between all parties.

Specific ways to keep programmes on track include:

1. Looking at the occupational status of the building. Are there unoccupied areas that can:
   - Reduce the requirement to manage noise and vibration making site progress quicker
   - Increase the availability of storage areas allowing stocks to be located on site
   - Provide more site offices and welfare facilities to improve working conditions and safety
   - Carry out asbestos removals
2. Programming more areas concurrently rather than sequentially
3. Revisiting the design. Can products be mechanically installed or installed by a single operative?
4. Safeguarding the availability of materials by:
   - Early procurement
   - Stockpiling
   - Using alternatives
5. Considering pre-fabrication or pre-assembly, alternative construction methodologies and application techniques to reduce task time spent on site:
   - Pre-plumbed and pre-wired panelling systems
   - Pre-hung door sets
   - Riser pipework modules
   - Packaged plant assemblies – valves and controls on HVAC

PART TWO: FIVE WAYS TO DELIVER A COVID-SAFE PROJECT

Work on construction sites continues during lockdown, but the way we work has changed overnight to achieve continuity and keep our staff, clients and subcontractors safe. While individual projects are driven by site and business-specific issues, these areas are common to all onsite works and remain relevant throughout the pandemic and beyond.

1. Planning and Communication

Involve the entire team in site and business-specific planning to make the project Covid-safe. A task-by-task approach will define how works can be carried out responsibly and in-line with Government guidelines. As guidance changes, in-built flexibility is key to ensuring amendments can be quickly adopted. In times of uncertainty, regular, clear communication with staff, clients and subcontractors is more critical than ever. Consider weekly works area plans for subcontractors and daily meetings with trades to ensure plans are agile.

2. Travel protocol

Everyone should be able to travel safely to site in line with their personal circumstances. Public transport should be avoided or allow of staff to travel off-peak. If on-site parking isn't available, then alternatives should be identified including offering bike storage facilities. During a local lockdown, authorisation letters might be required to travel.

3. Site Access Guidelines

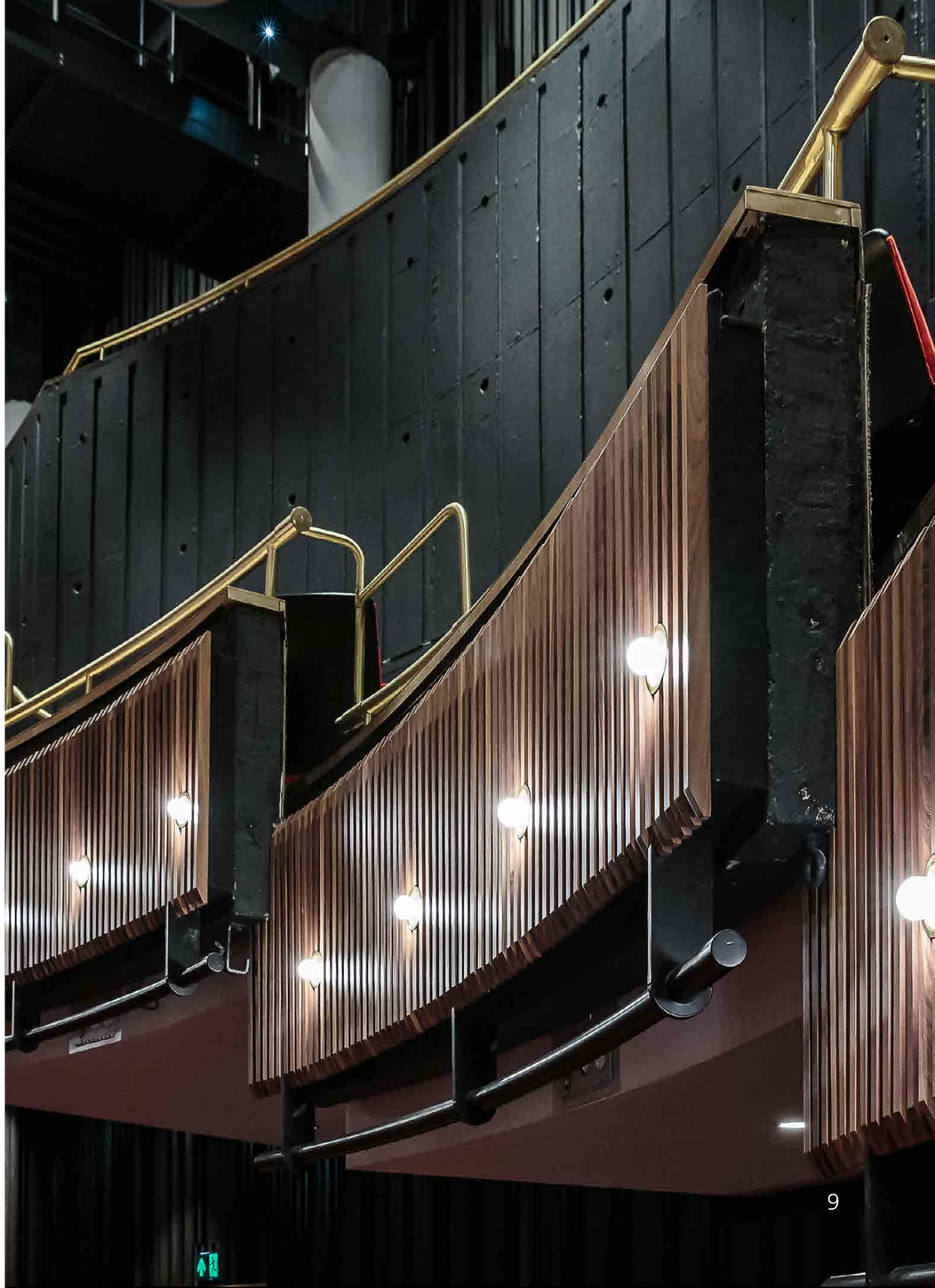
It's essential to plan ahead to avoid congestion at access points while retaining HSE compliance. This can be done by staggering start times, providing alternative sign-in methods to reduce contact points (such as passes or QR codes), and avoiding all non-essential visitors. Handwash and sanitiser stations must be available at all access points together with thermal imaging to monitor staff temperatures. Where practical, delivery drivers should remain in their vehicles.

4. Personal Welfare

Before arriving on site, everyone – including the client's security and facilities management teams – needs to be fully briefed about Covid-19 procedures, including on-site use of masks. Before work begins it is essential to adapt the layout of communal areas, such as WCs, site offices and changing facilities, to ensure social distancing. Breaks should be staggered to avoid congestion in welfare areas and teams should bring their own refreshments. Enhanced cleaning of communal areas reduces viral transmission and reassures site users.

5. Site Management

Achieving consistent compliance with Government guidance requires an enhanced and visible management presence. There are lots of ways to comply with social distancing, including one-way systems, splitting the site into work zones, extending programmes and double-shifting. Organising operatives into working units makes them easier to identify and can avoid confusion. If work needs to be carried out closer than 2m then it is important to issue people with a permit. Where practical, site inspections should be carried out using video technology.



CONCLUSION

Launching or continuing with a Higher Education construction project during Covid-19 is still possible. Overbury's experience and learning during lockdown has enabled us to deliver projects successfully under challenging circumstances.

For further information, advice or guidance on delivering safe and successful projects during the pandemic, please contact our Education specialist team.

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