Dear Chancellor,

I write to you in my position of Assistant General Secretary of Unite the Union, the only trade union organising across the whole of the construction sector. The purpose of my correspondence is to sound a necessary alarm on the impact of the Covid-19 economic downturn on construction apprenticeships.

Unite are calling on the UK Government to provide leadership, and to implement without delay economic policies that can help save existing construction apprenticeship jobs and ensure the summer 2020 intake of construction apprentices is of a level to meet the industry’s future needs. Failing to act now would increase the scourge of youth unemployment across communities and close the door on a positive route to a skilled and sustainable job in construction for a generation of young people.

Unite has members working across the whole of the construction and built environment sector. The sector will be a key enabler in stimulating growth in the UK economy. A vibrant construction sector has a clear multiplier effect creating activity within supply chains, creating jobs throughout the economy. This will not be sustainable unless we ensure that we train the skilled workers required.

I am therefore hugely concerned about the plight facing construction apprentices. As the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme tapers off companies will undoubtedly look for cost savings. Unite is aware that these saving measures will have a serious impact on the current construction apprentices. At present 50% of all electrical apprentices are furloughed and wider industry forecasts of a reduction in the intake of apprentices this year. There is anecdotal evidence that the figures are an underestimation arising from FE Colleges forecasting reduced demand and underreporting.

Unite believes there could be 20,000 less construction apprentices in place this autumn due to redundancies and reduced intake. This at a time when the UK government has stated its determination to ‘Build, build, build’ and invest in construction infrastructure projects. Any reduction in construction apprenticeships is a betrayal of the younger generation and hugely damaging to the construction industry’s ability to meet future demands. Our reduced source of skilled workers from Europe due to Brexit will only compound the problem we face.
Unite is calling upon all Government departments to act in a coordinated manner to help protect current and future construction apprentices. Unite proposes that taking the following immediate actions would help alleviate a crises in construction apprenticeships:

- Extension of apprentice wage support to safeguard the jobs of all construction apprentices.
- Taking all necessary steps to repurpose the apprenticeship levy funds in order to fund all first year apprenticeship pay.
- An economic approach that acts in times of crisis to ensure the future intake and full protection of existing apprentices—this should include uprating grant availability to construction employers.
- Public sector procurement policies that utilise social value considerations to determine the recruitment of a quota of high quality apprentices as a precursor to construction contract awards.
- Implement and extend the Job Guarantee Scheme so that apprentice opportunities are delivered in public sector funded construction infrastructure projects.

Unite are clear that now is the time to act and protect jobs and skills in the sector and to use every policy lever to invest in future skills. I very much welcome your response and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

Gail Cartmail
Assistant General Secretary