

Contractors ready to hire thousands if infrastructure funded



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Construction companies could hire thousands of people over the next few months, including apprentices, if the Commonwealth injects money into small road, power and telecommunications projects around the country, the Civil Contractors Federation says.

"If the government were to bring forward investment from its 10-year, \$100 billion [infrastructure] program [that's already been committed](#), we're able to take on more work, we can employ more people right now," CCF chief executive Chris Melham told *The Australian Financial Review*.



The civil construction industry says it could take on displaced workers and pay its own bills without government assistance.

A new survey of the CCF's member companies in every state and territory found that 65 per cent of the 228 companies that responded would be "very likely" to hire additional people if the government increased funding for new civil infrastructure projects.

Most companies said they had sufficient capacity to tender for projects up to \$10 million, while some 17 per cent had capacity to tender for projects up to \$50 million.

Australia would benefit more from lots of "shovel ready" smaller projects getting under way in rural and regional areas administered by local councils rather than just a few big projects in capital cities because the financial benefits would be spread through employment generating cash for spending, Mr Melham said.

"We will get much-needed confidence in those local economies and, more importantly, the return on that investment will stay in those local economies," he said, adding that big projects took too long to get through the procurement process.

The Urban Development Institute of Australia is pushing governments to fast track multibillion-dollar projects, including a rail line to the new Western Sydney Airport.

We can employ more people right now — CCF chief executive Chris Melham

Mr Melham said he had written to Prime Minister Scott Morrison several times in the past few weeks to stress that the civil construction industry could take on displaced workers and could pay its own bills without government assistance but had not yet received a response.

As well as taking on experienced people such as machinery operators and supervisors, construction groups could take on apprentices and train them on the job, he said.

The Commonwealth will start funding a new apprenticeship program on July 1 but most civil construction jobs are not among the occupations listed on the ["national skills need list"](#), which is used to determine who gets funding.

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The CCF has asked the federal government to update the list (which does include electricians, bricklayers and welders) to include civil construction occupations such as bridge, road and tunnel constructors, civil plant operators, pipe layers and line markers so employers can [access financial assistance to hire apprentices](#).

More than half of the companies that responded to the CCF's survey said COVID-19 had disrupted or delayed projects, but only 19 per cent said there had been a "significant negative impact" on their businesses.

More than 100 of the respondents cited lack of work opportunities due to the virus, while 93 referred to travel restrictions and 73 identified disruptions to supply chains.

Companies were finding it harder to get approvals from local councils as some restructured or shut down, and had experienced delays moving people and materials across state borders, Mr Melham said.

Social distancing was not a problem on most civil construction projects because they were horizontal – spread over a broader area – as opposed to vertical property projects, where people worked more closely together, he said.

Just over a quarter of companies that responded to the survey said [payment of invoices had been delayed](#) due to COVID-19.