



Department
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*From Jo Churchill MP
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The Rt Hon Sir George Howarth MP
By email to: george.howarth.mp@parliament.uk

20 March 2021

Dear Sir George,

Thank you for your correspondence of 22 February to the Attorney General's Office on behalf of a number of your constituents, about COVID-19 and the procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE). I apologise for the delay in replying, which has been caused by an unprecedented volume of correspondence throughout the pandemic and work to ensure frontline services are delivered.

We have been upfront throughout about the challenges we have faced with the huge international demand for PPE. However, we recognise that securing the right PPE for frontline workers is of paramount importance, not only for their protection, but to enable them to continue to deliver the first-class level of care that is amongst the best in the world.

Our approach has ensured that almost 32 billion items have been ordered from UK-based manufacturers and international partners to maintain a continuous supply, and since December 2020 we have maintained a four-month stockpile of all COVID-critical PPE, with a tremendous contribution from UK manufacturers, providing us with continued resilience.

Early last year, we issued a public call to action to meet the increased demand for PPE. Over 15,000 suppliers responded to that call and offered help and support. All offers were evaluated and prioritised according to volume, price, clinical compliance and acceptability and lead time. Companies that could provide a large amount of PPE at a fast pace, while ensuring all new products underwent the necessary rigorous safety and quality checks, were given priority for new contracts. The PPE provided must be fit for purpose in terms of safely providing adequate protection. Any product that does not meet the specifications is rejected and returned to the supplier according to its contract, and is not paid for or any money paid is reclaimed.

As part of this huge effort to access all appropriate sources of PPE for the front line, as well as suppliers with experience of supplying PPE, we aimed to reach those that had no prior experience but had access to sources of PPE through their business contacts. Many with no previous experience of PPE repurposed their production lines and/or their supply routes in order to begin or increase production or supply of PPE items, such as medical face masks and visors, and we are grateful for the extraordinary response from the public in these unprecedented times.

All the contracts awarded contain break clauses, meaning that if the company supplies faulty products, or misses delivery dates, we can cancel the contract and reclaim any money spent. This is standard practice with Government procurement; contingency plans are routinely built into all new contracts, and we seek formal agreements with parent companies to mitigate any liabilities. Almost all the contracts and contract award notices have now been published on Contracts Finder, which can be found at www.gov.uk/contracts-finder.

In response to the pandemic, we have procured goods, services and works with extreme urgency, but in accordance with procurement rules and processes and Cabinet Office guidance throughout. These rules can be found at www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2015/102/regulation/32. All contracts had to undergo Accounting Officer approval, regardless of value, with higher-value contracts being subject to HM Treasury approval. As highlighted above, we have a robust process in place to ensure that orders are of a high standard and meet commercial due diligence and that due process has been followed.

I hope this reply is helpful to your constituents.



JO CHURCHILL