

CORONAVIRUS HITS OFFSHORE OIL & GAS INDUSTRIES

Trying to self-isolate on an oil platform situated some 300 miles north-east of Aberdeen in the inhospitable North Sea is not something that is easy to accomplish. Yet this is the challenge now facing North Sea energy groups who are coping with the logistical nightmare of quarantining offshore workers who have contracted the COVID-19 disease.

Life offshore is lived in extremely close proximity. Platforms house hundreds of men, who share living quarters designed to allow for constant shifts of 12 hours-on and 12 hours-off. Personal space is at a premium. So, when the disease hits, isolating those affected is almost impossible.

Recently, Taqa, the Abu Dhabi energy company, had to separate more than a dozen staff with COVID-19 symptoms on its North Cormorant and Cormorant Alpha platforms. Shell, BP and Chrysaor have also faced the same problem.

Even though energy companies are facing challenges from falling demand for crude and crashing oil prices, the biggest challenge of the Coronavirus is the protection of offshore workers. Designated as “key workers” who are essential to the critical infrastructure of the UK, most cannot work from home and many will contract the virus.

So far, some of the oil and gas companies have joined forces and commissioned a specially adapted helicopter, known as the “corona copter”, to ferry stricken workers onshore. Urgent staffing assessment are being made to judge the minimum level of staffing needed to keep the UK’s oil and gas flowing.

“Down-manning”, as it is known, has led to a cull from the usual 11,500 people working offshore to about 7000. As the summer approaches, companies are having to make difficult decisions to postpone maintenance work which is normally carried out at this time of year. There is no point in having large numbers of people together offshore if the risk is of key people being struck down and the project left high and dry.

Ineos, Sir Jim Ratcliffe’s petrochemical giant, is delaying a planned shutdown of the Forties Pipeline System that takes oil & gas from more than 80 fields in the North Sea to an onshore base.

While companies such as Shell, who recently quarantined a worker on the Brent Charlie platform before flying him off, are taking steps to minimise the risk to the business, essential staff such as the Offshore Installation Manager and the Control Room Operator, have not yet been classified as critical, meaning that they cannot be tested and therefore may self-isolate unnecessarily. These are roles critical to the safe functioning of an offshore platform, as was seen in the Piper Alpha disaster.

Upgrading the status of offshore workers would also help with the logistical challenge unique to an industry that pulls in workers from all parts of the UK and overseas. Getting offshore workers to Aberdeen from the four points of the compass is a huge challenge at a time when travel by train and plane is almost impossible. This could be helped by the UK Government upgrading the status of these workers and thus maintaining the stability of this critically important sector.