

# Small companies are riding to the rescue of country in crisis

## From bicycles to face protection, businesses have stepped up a gear to help

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Monday April 06 2020, 12.00am, The Times

Frontline workers at St Bartholomew's hospital in the City of London have been supplied with Brompton bikes that mean they can steer clear of public transport



When Will Butler-Adams heard that Brompton, his foldable bicycle company, had been contacted by St Bartholomew's hospital in London to see if it could provide bikes to NHS staff, he knew that his team would have to work fast. The hospital was looking for ways for healthcare workers to get to the hospital without taking public transport, where they would be more likely to be exposed to the coronavirus. "In normal times we'd spend three months mulling it over, but that's no good," Mr Butler-Adams recalled. "We just had to put together a plan."

Within days, [Brompton](#) had supplied 50 bikes from surplus stock. Two weeks and 200 bikes later, Brompton was beginning to run out of parts, so staff put together a crowdfunding page appealing for £400,000 to supply a further 1,000 bikes to the NHS, with Brompton committing production capacity worth £100,000 and rewards including free hire, factory tours and the donor's name painted on the body of the blue and white cycles.

Mr Butler-Adams, 45, is not surprised to see Britain’s small businesses stepping in with pragmatic responses to demands for services and goods driven by coronavirus. After all, “smaller businesses are a bit more pragmatic in difficult situations and able to be more flexible. As a business, we have been given special status to continue trading, which is a privilege — so we have a responsibility to do more.”

Up and down the country, small businesses are switching production to support the fight against Covid-19, answering pleas for everything from [hand sanitiser](#) to diagnostic technology. Many, from bra designers to blind manufacturers, say that they are responding to urgent calls for protective equipment from key workers and people unable to stay indoors, even as the government and NHS chiefs insist that adequate supplies are being distributed.

Bloc Blinds, which employs just over 100 staff at its factory in Magherafelt, Northern Ireland, has switched from making blinds to producing 22,000 face shields a day. Cormac Diamond, its chief executive, designed the protective face gear after Boris Johnson announced that all non-essential businesses had to stop trading from March 24.

“We were trying to help by initially staying at home; now we are able to help in another way,” Mr Diamond, 43, said. Within a week, the company had designed a protective mask and had set up a temporary factory in nearby Meadowbank Arena, provided by Mid Ulster Council, in order to carry out assembly while observing rules around social distancing. Bloc Blinds has since doubled staff numbers to 200 as it tries to produce 500,000 masks a week for the health service in Northern Ireland. “We are busy, and there is a sense of pride among staff that we have been able to do something to help in this crisis.”



Bloc Blinds has switched to producing 22,000 face shields a day

Many small manufacturers are working in response to consumer demand rather than for the authorities, owing to the high standards required to supply the NHS. Lancashire Textiles, which usually makes duvets, pillows and mattresses, has been inundated with requests from care homes and the public since it started making hand-stitched masks.

“People are ordering in quite amazing volumes,” Steve Aspey, its sales manager, said. “We haven’t had to make any redundancies or reduce our working hours. We’ve maintained our

workforce when we would have had to reduce it if we hadn't found this other outlet." He said that the company, which employs 35 people and has an annual turnover of £5 million, had been able to switch to mask-making because it had a flexible production system that employed machinists, rather than using automation.

In the rush to help, some firms have not met NHS standards for goods. [Brewdog](#), the Scottish brewer that is 22 per cent-owned by TSG Consumer Partners, a San Francisco-based private equity firm, had its first batch of Brewgel hand sanitiser turned down by hospitals in Scotland after it did not meet requirements for alcohol content. The business worked with the NHS to produce a second batch that was accepted on April 3 and supplied charities and frontline workers in the meantime.

Rachel Kenyon, whose lingerie label Buttress and Snatch has supplied couture bras for clients including Salma Hayek, the actress, and Madonna, the singer, said that she had been criticised after she started making protective masks and distributing a PDF of a simple pattern to encourage others to contribute.

"I'm an engineer and my work involves solving problems, including making bras for women post-mastectomy. So I have said I will make masks for anyone who needs them," Ms Kenyon, 47, said. "I'm not a scientist or any kind of expert; I'm just a person who is using sewing and common sense."

She said that the masks were intended to provide a barrier for people who could not stay at home. "Everything is tied up in knots with bureaucracy and we need to ditch that and get it working. With globalisation, we have lost our manufacturing industry and as a result we are in a horrific crisis with personal protective equipment [PPE]."

In mid-March, the government appealed to small manufacturers to fill in a survey asking what protective equipment and other services they could provide. Thousands of businesses are thought to have responded. Kate Hills, from Make It British, the trade group, has put together the British Textile Consortium, a group of manufacturers working with the government to produce protective equipment for health workers on a large scale.

"The government put out a procurement form, but they weren't specific in what they were looking for and they had thousands of responses, everyone from one-man bands to dodgy types trying to trade PPE on the black market," she said.

Ms Hills added that the UK's small manufacturers had capacity but needed to be connected through domestic supply chains. "A lot of these companies are exporting, including a UK company that was making masks and exporting them because our government didn't want to buy them. These are sewing factories who work for big brands as orders for retailers have dried up."

The consortium is working with the Cabinet Office on what the supply chain should look like. Jenny Holloway, chief executive of Fashion-Enter, a garment manufacturer in north London, is part of the consortium. She said that it had received its first order of 10,000 garments, or 5,000 scrubs, for the NHS, on top of the masks it was making for a private client — a boost in itself, as was its signal of a bigger picture: "I'm excited that [the government] is going to build the UK supply network up for this and keep manufacturers in business."

## From concept to sample in six days . . . the race to get key products into service

Small businesses in Britain's growing health technology sector are springing into action (Hazel Sheffield writes). According to the Association of British Healthtech Industries, the sector, which employs more than 130,000 people in 3,900 companies, and its expertise are in increasingly high demand.



Oxford Optronix's device will be manufactured by Mercedes

One such firm is Oxford Optronix, a life sciences manufacturer that employs 11 people at its base near Oxford. It became involved in the effort, led by University College London and Mercedes-AMG High Performance Powertrains, the Formula One motor racing engine maker, to build a breathing aid known as "continuous positive airway pressure" after Andy Obeid, its chief executive, received an urgent call from Mervyn Singer, of UCL, one Saturday in March. Professor Singer wanted to know how a medical device might be designed to continuously measure the concentration of oxygen delivered to a patient suffering from breathing difficulties.

"I soon realised that Mervyn was rather politely asking me to do something in five days that would normally take two years," Dr Obeid said. "We designed this product within five or six days from concept to sample in a timeframe that would normally take years.

"It's surreal. We've never worked at this level or this capacity before and we're relying on other smaller British manufacturers as well. They are all working their socks off." The breathing aid has been approved for use by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency.

In February, [Mologic](#), a company in Bedford that produces diagnostic products, was granted £1 million in government funding to develop a rapid diagnostic test for the coronavirus. Joe Fitchett, medical director, said that it was ahead of schedule to deliver a ten-minute antibody test and was on track with a ten-minute antigen test within three months.

"It's been a difficult process for all to adapt to working in a pandemic," Dr Fitchett said. "However, we see our key worker status as a privilege and have mobilised across the company to deliver the tools we urgently need."