
MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING RESEARCH

Mental Health and Construction: A Coordinated Approach

A photograph of a smiling Black man wearing a high-visibility yellow and green safety jacket, looking towards the right. Another person in a similar jacket is partially visible in the foreground on the right. The background is slightly blurred, showing an outdoor setting.

**AUGUST
2021**

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“The Construction Leadership Council (CLC) is acutely aware of the mental health and wellbeing challenges faced by industry. Progress towards improving the situation has been frustratingly slow in recent years and there is no doubt that some of the statistics relating to mental health and construction are not good enough.

Encouragingly, this report from CITB includes good examples of best practice from which the whole sector can be inspired. The CLC will provide the shared vision and goals that industry has called for. We will do our utmost to accelerate improvements across the sector, particularly for SMEs, and look forward to collaborating with stakeholders on this crucial construction priority.”

Alasdair Reisner
Construction Leadership Council

Foreword

Improving the mental health of construction's workforce is a major challenge. Caring about the mental health and wellbeing of individuals working in our industry is important for numerous reasons.

A healthier, happier environment will attract new people, improve productivity and enhance construction's reputation. Most importantly it will mean better lives and saving them. Industry leaders are keenly aware of the need to improve mental health and wellbeing. And while an encouraging number of employers are taking positive action, more work is urgently needed.

This research highlights the scale of the mental health challenge facing industry; the factors driving poor wellbeing; and the solutions that will help the workforce post COVID-19. It shows that coordinated leadership, from the Construction Leadership Council (CLC), supported by CITB, is required to improve mental health in construction.

Success

The pandemic has placed greater pressures on the mental health of construction's workforce. But even though COVID-19 has been disastrous for many, industry's response has resulted in some positive wellbeing developments which we can build on. The pandemic has led to new working practices and learning, flexible working hours, fewer staff on site and improved hygiene. These changes have contributed to an atmosphere conducive to improved personal wellbeing.

Industry can learn from pre-pandemic initiatives too, for example, Timewise, Building Mental Health and from the charity Mates in Mind. Timewise has seen four major employers collaborate on flexible working hours. Building Mental Health, supported by the Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity, provides free support and resources, from industry experts, to increase mental health awareness. And Mates in Mind addresses the

stigma of poor mental health and promotes mental wellbeing in the workplace. Crucially, the charity works in partnership with key groups from various sectors, recognising that a one-size fits all approach doesn't work for everyone. These examples can inspire industry to change and improve.

Coordinated leadership

The employers we spoke to for this report told us that to improve mental health in construction they wanted a body overseeing and leading the effort with clear messages and goals. Encouragingly, this leadership has already been established by the CLC.

The CLC identified the potential benefits of achieving industry-wide improvement and listed it in their recovery plan. CITB will work closely with the CLC, which has the support of industry and Government in England, in leading a modern approach to tackling mental health and wellbeing issues. CITB will support industry in England, Scotland and Wales with research, like this, and strategic investment. We will also encourage collaboration.

Our research has identified many good schemes and initiatives. But they struggle to make the desired impact because they are in isolation and lack a coherent aim and message. That is why collective effort and partnership is so essential.

The establishment of a pan-industry working group has been proposed so key stakeholders can agree how best to support existing work notably: Mates in Mind (Maturity Matrix), Safer Highways (Thriving at Work surveys) and the Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity (Construction Workforce Health and Wellbeing

dashboard). This working group will build on progress and include measuring the baseline levels of mental health and wellbeing in industry; agreeing priorities and developing a shared vision for the sector.

Learning from new initiatives and past mistakes

One of the key challenges for the industry is to ensure that mental health and wellbeing support is extended to small firms (including through supply chains), sub-contractors and self-employed workers. These often difficult-to-reach workers should be at the forefront of new thinking.

Sharing what is working is essential for success too. New initiatives must focus on prevention *before* crisis. Construction is a people industry and personal connections are vital for improving wellbeing.

The need for a dashboard and a wellbeing and resilience hub

A major highlight from this research is the need for a unifying mental health and wellbeing dashboard, a tool that could assess issues like anxiety, depression, fatigue and stress.

The Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity, with whom CITB is working on other initiatives, has already started developing an interactive dashboard for construction across the UK and Ireland in collaboration with Caledonian University. CITB will monitor progress with a view to sharing and publicising the tools available as they are introduced.

This report shows that although good work is well underway, making the changes to improve construction's reputation on mental health and wellbeing won't be easy. But the potential impact of change can be transformative. Get it right and industry working conditions will improve, construction can thrive and lives will be improved and saved.

Marcus Bennett

Head of Industry Analysis and Forecasting, CITB





Main report findings at a glance

This report is the most comprehensive study conducted on mental health within construction. It collates pre-existing research with up-to-date feedback from industry.

Findings show that, despite recent improvements, as an industry we have some way to go. However, the report also identifies increasing understanding and awareness of the problems faced by individuals. It reflects the desire of employers for change in the industry and highlights a number of projects that are leading the way for others to follow.

Construction companies and industry stakeholders emphasise the need for leadership to improve mental health and wellbeing – for those with influence to take responsibility. Coordinated leadership will bring significant benefits to individuals. It will also enhance quality outputs and productivity.

The Construction Leadership Council (CLC), with support from CITB, has already taken the lead in engaging with organisations to agree the best way to deliver an integrated support service of shared goals and strategies.

“The willingness to improve mental health and wellbeing in the construction industry has increased in recent years. However, as the findings in this report show, the pace of change needs to accelerate as a matter of urgency. The construction industry has a duty to its workforce to ensure this happens and is demonstrating already how it benefits from positive change. A happier, healthier workforce is one that recognises good employers and is more consistently available to deliver high quality outputs.

CITB is well-placed to guide industry’s leaders on mental health reforms called for in this report. CITB has invested in skills and industry practices, such as for Fairness, Inclusion and Respect, and plays an important role in undertaking analysis and research to guide industry in areas where it can benefit.”

Steve Radley
Strategy and Policy Director, CITB



Background to the research: construction's obligation

Physical health and safety are a significant priority in the construction industry. Site safety has been transformed as a result of years of concerted focus by industry with support from CITB and others. Employers have a legal duty to ensure that the health, safety, and welfare of employees are protected. This needs to include protecting mental wellbeing.

However, statistics highlight the urgent need for steps to reduce the stigma surrounding mental health and improve support to workers. Figures show that:

- Suicide often kills more people than falls from height (Samaritans, 2016)
- The risk of suicide among some site based male construction workers was three times the national average and skilled finishing trades, such as painters and plasterers, were twice the national average
- Furthermore, a May 2020 Chartered Institute of Building report found that 26% of construction workers who responded to their survey had experienced suicidal thoughts; 97% had experienced stress over the past year.

Mental health is deeply entwined with all areas of life, and given that such a big chunk of workers' time is spent in the workplace, it is crucial to understand all the ways in which the environment and operation of the industry is contributing to this negative picture.

Poor mental health is inextricably linked to physical health, which in turn impacts performance and quality, and ultimately affects productivity, creativity and morale. It makes the industry less attractive to work in, it makes businesses less profitable and damages their reputation. More importantly and tragically, it blights and costs lives and means that many people are working while [invisibly] suffering from stress, anxiety and depression.

In its Roadmap to Recovery, the CLC identified the need to improve and embed higher standards within industry, including occupational and mental health and safety; along with an industry-wide approach that promotes better mental health amongst the workforce.



“There is not much awareness on the issue – mental health has not been addressed in the same way as physical health. Improvements have mostly come from larger companies as they have the resources to do this. SMEs often receive mixed messages about what support is available to them, so they are forced to rely on larger companies.”

Interviewee from a representative group



Research objectives

Industry leaders have recognised the growing challenge of improving mental health in the workplace. This is why CITB commissioned RSM Consulting to conduct an in-depth review of the construction industry and practices around mental health and wellness in the sector.

This has drawn on the great work already being done by organisations and charities in the industry.

The **main objectives of the research** included:

- Exploring how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated emotional and mental stress, and the wider impact this will have – especially how it may constrain industry recovery
- Identifying key players and stakeholders and exploring how they can work together, as well as assessing the requirement for more leadership on mental health in construction
- Evaluating the effectiveness and uptake of existing wellbeing initiatives and whether these can be expanded across the industry
- Evaluating the most effective ways to target small and micro construction companies to help them tackle the issue; be it through the wider supply chain or direct support for those outside the supply chain.

Key research findings

The traditional practices of industry exacerbate poor mental health.

Key triggers of poor mental health produced by our industry are:

- Working away from home and frequent travelling
- Occupational stressors
- Heavy workloads and long working hours
- Job insecurity.

In some cases poor management practices and understanding exacerbate the problem but there are also exemplars doing a great job of looking after their workers – and it is in large part this inconsistency that needs to be tackled.

The mixed impact of COVID-19

The onset of COVID-19 has had a mixed impact on industry and the full impact of the pandemic is as yet still unknown. Many will have felt uncertainty regarding job security as well as a loss of structure and routine. Exposure to the virus will also have affected psychological wellbeing.

As construction continued during the pandemic a lot of employers and individuals adapted positively in trying circumstances, introducing positive measures to boost wellbeing. Industry had to invest greater time in planning work tasks, operating with fewer workers onsite and improving housekeeping.

The positive changes to induction processes, including welfare and hygiene arrangements, have the potential to improve safety, wellbeing and motivation for the workforce if maintained in the longer term. Construction must take learnings from this and not revert to old practices, which place additional stress on the workforce.

The level and quality of evidence must improve to enable change

There is a range of different mental health and wellbeing support available from industry professional bodies, charities and employers. However, the focus is largely on awareness raising and online supports.

Evidence of the effectiveness of the support available is limited and focuses mainly on measuring uptake levels. There is little evidence of the true impact on mental health and wellbeing.

It is essential that the level and quality of evidence improves to provide employers with sufficient information to help them make informed decisions about the most effective supports.

Organisations must take responsibility for supporting supply chains

There is evidence that organisations are providing mental health and wellbeing support programmes and initiatives to direct employees and, to some extent, to supply chain employees. However, key stakeholders and construction companies reported that supply chain employees are often not aware that they can access mental health and wellbeing resources from their principal contractor.

There are also cases where a major employer provides good support for its own workers but the pressures to deliver get passed down the supply chain where there is minimal or no support.

One effective way to target small and micro construction companies is through principal contractors creating awareness with their supply chain of the importance of mental health and sharing effectiveness data once it becomes available. Creating opportunity – time and space – to access support is crucial, too.



What has CITB done so far?

CITB has invested in numerous programmes aimed at helping industry develop skills, behaviours and ways of working that will make it a safer, healthier place to work.

“In recent years CITB has seen the benefit of our investment in Mental Health First Aiders, our awareness-training courses, and a range of initiatives by employers large and small. Some decent foundations are in place, industry needs to build on them in a joined-up way as soon as possible.”

Steve Radley
Strategy and Policy Director, CITB

- Mental health was introduced into the CITB Grants Scheme in 2018, as part of our Grant reforms. Since June 2018 CITB has funded over 29,000 mental health courses, to the value of approx. £11.1m
- CITB provided funding with Build UK for the Construction Timewise project where Bam Construct, Bam Nuttall, Skanska and Willmott Dixon joined forces to identify what measures will best enhance flexible working for their 11,000 employees (approx)
- Funding by CITB, through the Building Mental Health initiative, the Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity and Mental Health First Aid England, has helped train over 260 Mental Health First Aid Instructors. They, in turn, have trained over 3,000 mental health first aiders in the construction sector – they have already helped approximately 6,300 people
- In September 2021 CITB will be detailing Leadership and Management support for site-based employees. This will include mental health training for site-based managers.

How CITB will help the Construction Leadership Council

Many of the construction companies and industry stakeholders consulted for this report suggested leadership needed to come from a government-sponsored body which could be considered 'neutral'; meaning it would not be 'owned' by any specific sub-sector.

While CITB recognises it has a role to play in achieving positive outcomes for the health and wellbeing of the construction industry, the CLC has stated its leadership role and has wider industry influence so CITB will work with the CLC to achieve the changes required.

The CLC has already defined the need for action around improving mental wellbeing and health in general. CITB's focus will be supporting existing and developing plans. This is what industry wants us to do:

- Set up a working group to bring together the different stakeholders already involved and ensure coverage from all sub-sectors. The purpose of the group will include showcasing best practice and providing networking opportunities for construction companies to learn from each other
- Develop a 'centralised platform' for information and support. Companies do not wish to receive conflicting information from different sources
- Promote work already ongoing in the sector for example, the Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity and Mates in Mind
- Review the needs of smaller firms so that they can access the resources they require
- Fund and promote the existing Mates in Mind impact awards to recognise organisations who have performed well in relation to mental health and wellbeing in their workplace
- An 'authoritative' dashboard requires everyone to buy-in. Larger companies producing their own could dilute an industry response.

"A convening body is needed to look at mental health and wellbeing in the construction industry. Lots of organisations are currently doing their own thing so the approach is very disjointed and there are lots of opportunities for people to work together more. Getting the voice of employees would also help employers to understand the issues."

Interviewee from general wellbeing charity

Collecting better evidence, creating a dashboard

There is a strong evidence base – from across the sector – that a health indicator via a wellbeing dashboard is needed, and is likely to encourage a strong response from the industry.

“The dashboard needs to be consistent, and something everyone recognises and can measure. It must be something that becomes the recognised standard as it is hard to put a figure against wellbeing as it is affected by so many factors.”

Interviewee from the construction industry

A dashboard will give insight into how programmes the industry is undertaking are delivering on wellbeing indicators like anxiety, depression, fatigue and stress.

There is existing work in this area such as the: Mates in Mind Maturity Matrix; Thriving at Work surveys; and work by the Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity on an interactive dashboard that covers all of construction in the UK and Ireland.

Mental health and wellbeing dashboards reviewed vary on matters like Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), detail included and data sources used. None measure all the key mental health and wellbeing indicators identified in the literature review.

Although there are several published sources of data available relating to mental health and wellbeing, only data on the suicide rate by occupation in England and

Wales includes information specific to construction.

Establishing mental health and wellbeing KPIs for the sector will be challenging given factors including:

- The limitations of available data and KPIs
- The transient nature of construction workers (as they can move from employer to employer based on contracts)
- When companies are not legally required to provide it.

Construction companies and industry stakeholders highlighted that any future dashboard should also measure progression (i.e. the level ‘maturity’ of a company) regarding mental health and wellbeing as well as the level of signposting to appropriate sources of support to address any gaps or ‘underperforming’ areas.

“Doing things right is important; doing right things can save lives. Implementing and measuring a comprehensive programme to improve workforce wellbeing in construction needs no thought, it is the right thing to do. It will improve the workplace culture, support and retain the existing workforce, make the industry more attractive to the next generation and will undoubtedly save lives.”

Bill Hill

CEO, Lighthouse Construction
Industry Charity



Best practice – examples for others to follow

The full research report includes case studies and best practice from: Laing O’ Rourke, Construction News, Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity, Tideway, Willmott Dixon, Mental Health First Aid England, Mind and Building Mental Health.

Here are some examples that industry can take inspiration from:

Tideway – Mental Health Maturity Matrix

Tideway’s mental health maturity matrix aims to aid companies in evaluating their performance regarding mental health within the workplace. Support provided includes: producing and communicating a mental health at work plan; developing mental health awareness among employees; encouraging open conversations about mental health; and the support available when employees are struggling.

All of Tideway’s main works contractors use the matrix, as well as a few of the subcontractors. Although the exact number of users is unknown, the matrix is accessible to everyone and this is promoted both within the organisation and to supply chains. In this way, they have been effectively able to reach SMEs and small and micro employers.

Mind Builder

Mind Builder is a new initiative, to create a wellbeing and resilience hub, being developed by Lighthouse, with funding of £444,996 from CITB and match funding of £190,714 from Laing O’ Rourke and its partners.

Mind Builder is a collaboration between Laing O’Rourke, The Samaritans and the Supply Chain Sustainability School. It will target hard to reach (micro-organisations) in the construction industry. Mind Builder will make industry better equipped to manage mental health, wellbeing and resilience issues encountered in the workplace.

Mind’s Wellbeing Index

Mind has recently undertaken research on the mental health needs of the construction industry. The purpose of the Wellbeing Index is for construction employers to get assessment of support that they put in place (for EAPs, policies, staff feedback). The index assesses where the gaps lie between an organisation’s approach to workplace wellbeing, and staff perceptions, and recognises the good work employers are doing to support their staff.

Feedback that Mind has had from the construction industry shows that the Wellbeing Index has been very helpful for helping organisations identify how to improve their mental health and wellbeing support.

If you need help

The Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity has been delivering charitable support to the construction industry since 1956, offering emotional and financial support to families in crisis.

If you would like to apply for financial or wellbeing support you can either call their free 24/7 confidential Construction Industry Helpline for help now (on **0345 605 1956** in the UK, and **1800 939 122** in Ireland) or submit your application online via: www.lighthouseclub.org/get-help-now

Samaritans offers a safe place for you to talk any time you like, in your own way – about whatever's getting to you. The charity won't judge you or tell you what to do, but will listen to you. Whatever you're going through, call free any time, from any phone, on **116 123**.

Methodology

CITB commissioned RSM Consulting to explore mental health and wellbeing in the construction sector. 16 qualitative interviews with key stakeholders took place. 256 quantitative interviews were held with construction companies of all sizes across Great Britain.