

Written evidence submitted by Mates in Mind (IMH0057)

Executive summary

“Suicide will always be a permanent solution to what can be a temporary problem.”

Two construction workers take their own lives every working day (on average) with 507 recorded in 2021 alone. Mental Health issues faced by those within construction is 4x higher than the general population. This is too many, and it has to stop. However, in recent years this devastating statistic has not reduced, as often greater focus and reliance is placed on the more reactive measures such as helplines, apps, and Mental Health First Aiders in place of primary prevention measures such as psychosocial risk identification, mitigation and awareness training. But there is a way. Over the last six years Mates in Mind have advocated for:

- **A proactive, prevention strategy** – empowering employers and employees with the guidance, skills, resources and confidence to change their workplace culture and identify contributory risks.
- **A holistic strategy** - rather than focusing on a tick box approach to mental health or prioritising crisis support at the point of need - we educate, train and support employers and their employees across the **whole** workforce to ensure there is a continuous and comprehensive solution in place so that no-one reaches crisis point and mental health awareness becomes everyone’s issue.
- **Remove the stigma** – too many people are afraid to talk about mental health at work. An open and supportive workplace culture with proactive steps to support people early can overcome that.

This submission focuses on construction, as well as related sectors including transport, logistics, manufacturing and others, as they are the areas where we have most experience and evidence. However, much of the commentary can equally be applied to other industries. Whilst many of the recommendations are gender neutral, they would benefit all genders and particularly those identifying as male as they are the largest cohort working in the sectors previously mentioned. We also know that 1 in 4 people within construction identify as neurodiverse¹, and this community has a higher predisposition to personal mental health challenges, and many will not currently share their diagnosis with colleagues or line managers.

Top line recommendations

1. Ensure the Equality Act 2010 is explicit in covering mental health and use asset-based language to help remove the stigma.
2. Update RIDDOR legislation and reporting requirements to include suicide to ensure organisations take their mental wellbeing duty of care seriously.
3. Update HSE’s guidance on writing a ‘health and safety policy’ to include a mental wellbeing strategy to prevent ill-health and enforce a more stringent inspection process of organisations to assess their compliance with the legal duty of care to protect workers from stress at work by doing a risk assessment and acting on it.
4. Update the HM Treasury’s Annual Report writing guidance, staff report section 6.5.45.i to be explicit about reporting on mental wellbeing and action taken to support employees.

¹ [Neurodiversity Report | Construction | NFB \(builders.org.uk\)](https://builders.org.uk/neurodiversity-report)

5. Department for Education to ensure that all apprenticeship, further education, A-level and degree courses include mental wellbeing within the curricula to prepare future workforces.
6. Continue to build and support the cross-government ten-year plan for mental health and wellbeing to ensure it is at the heart of government.
7. The Government and NHS should run a public awareness campaign.
8. Include a mandatory proactive approach to mental health within all Government awarded contracts as part of the procurement process.

Why is this important?

Research shows that:

- A third of construction workers live and work with **severe** levels of anxiety.²
- In 2021, there were 6,319 suicides registered in the UK, of which 507 were in construction alone, that is an average of **two people taking their own life every working day**.³
- In 2020, men accounted for three-quarters of all suicides. We also know that workers in construction were at some of the highest risk of suicide in the country, at 3.7 times higher than the national average. For men working in skilled trades, the highest risk was amongst those in building finishing trades who had more than double the suicide risk of the male national average.⁴
- Drivers of work lift trucks had a suicide rate 85% higher than the national average.⁵
- Four in five suicides are by men, with suicide the biggest cause of death for men under 35.⁶
- 2 in 3 UK tradespeople have misused drugs and/or alcohol to mitigate symptoms of mental ill-health.⁷
- Mental ill-health costs employers in the private sector £45bn (September 2020-August 2021) and £10bn in the public sector. The same report found that on average businesses achieve a £5 return for every £1 spent on wellbeing support.⁸

Through a holistic prevention strategy these statistics can, and must, be improved.

Full submission

Mental health in the workplace is a legal requirement. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974, The Equalities Act 2010 and Protection from Harassment Act 1997, employers have a duty of care to ensure the

² [Supporting the mental health of self employed construction workers report](#), Mates in Mind, 2022

³ [Suicide statistics](#) - House of Commons Library (parliament.uk)

⁴ [Suicide by occupation, England](#) - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

⁵ [Suicide by occupation, England](#) - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk)

⁶ [MPs to examine men's mental and physical health in new inquiry - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

⁷ [Mental Health White Paper - On The Tools](#)

⁸ [Mental health and employers: the case for investment - pandemic and beyond | Deloitte UK](#)

health, safety and wellbeing of their employees, including mental health/stress, and to protect employees with mental ill-health against discrimination and harassment.

Mental wellbeing in the workplace is also good for the employee, for example, improving confidence, purpose, achievement, positive relationships, and inclusion. It also benefits the business, for example, increased productivity, a reduction in sickness and staff turnover, and it demonstrates that they are a good, safe, and supportive place to work.

Despite this the stigma about mental health remains, and can have devastating impacts, as we have been told by the families, friends and colleagues of those who have taken their own lives⁹:

“I don’t think he knew what was going on in his head and I think he just wanted it to stop.”

“He opened up to myself and Frank, and we were quite surprised at how his demeanour changed and some of the things he was taking on board, how it was affecting him, it wasn’t the Chris we knew.”

“No one saw it coming. It was a shock.”

“Other families don’t have to go through what we’re going through. We’d like to save them from going through it, so mental health or stress in the workplace is dealt with.”

“It could happen to anybody.”

“Reach out before it becomes too late, because my family’s experienced it and it’s the worst thing anyone can experience.”

“Companies need to know what’s happening, and that stress can kill.”

Survey respondents also told us:

“I’ve always thought that, even though this job is hard, you had to show that you can cope with the pressure and never admit that you’re struggling a bit. You don’t want people to think you’re a bit ‘flaky’ or that you can’t be relied on. So you keep quiet and soldier on, don’t you?”

“This should not be a taboo, people should feel empowered to speak up. Construction is core to growth and investment so if mental health is an issue then this must be addressed otherwise risk a loss or reduction of workforce which will have long term effects to future growth.”

Recommendations:

- 1. Ensure the Equality Act 2010 is explicit in covering mental health and use asset-based language to help remove the stigma.**

The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. It states, ‘You’re disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’

⁹ Watch Chris’s story which shows the impact of suicide on those left behind: <https://youtu.be/ZDg14zNIF-w>

and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.'¹⁰ However, there are two issues with this definition:

- Firstly, research shows that over half of UK employees (and notably 57% of Millennials) do not feel comfortable disclosing mental health or psychological conditions to their employers¹¹. Our own research found almost half of our respondents reported that they found 'talking about my mental health extremely difficult' and almost 70 per cent agreed that 'there is a stigma about mental health which stops people from talking about it'.¹²
- Secondly, mental health is covered by 'mental impairment' within the 'disability' characteristic. This terminology affirms the stigma and discourages people from starting conversations.

Everyone has mental health - on sliding scales, a) health: from wellbeing to ill-health, and b) time: from 'never' to 'all the time'. Therefore, our recommendations are to:

- Make mental health more explicit in the protected characteristics.
- Change the rhetoric to a more **positive** terminology around protecting mental wellbeing, rather than discriminating against anyone who has mental ill-health in order to remove the stigma.

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>

¹¹ [More than half of UK staff uncomfortable with discussing mental health at work | Organisational Culture | HR Grapevine | Feature](#)

¹² [Supporting the mental health of self employed construction workers report](#), Mates in Mind, 2022

2. Update the RIDDOR reporting requirements to include suicide.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) RIDDOR reporting requirement under current legislation states, ‘All deaths to workers and non-workers, with the exception of suicides, must be reported if they arise from a work-related accident, including an act of physical violence to a worker’.¹³ The inclusion or exclusion of suicides in reporting is a matter of some debate, particularly as suicide can, but not always, be due to a number of factors not solely work related and not always occurring on site.

As the Office of National Statistics report says, ‘Attempting to explain suicide is complex as it is likely that a number of factors act together to increase risk, including some job-related features. We believe employers can play a critical role in helping to prevent suicides’.¹⁴

Our Mates in Mind research found that the following five areas were contributing relatively frequently to feelings of stress, anxiety or low mood:

- I worry that my workload is too high (42% experiencing this frequently).
- I feel low because of my business partners/colleagues (37%).
- I feel low because of pressure at work (35%).
- I feel anxious about family or relationship problems (33%).
- I feel stressed by financial problems or debt (32%).

Other concerns included impact that work has on family life, and worries about being hurt or injured at work. In combination, high economic insecurity, low support, high workloads, and long or irregular working hours can have negative effects on mental health and have a detrimental effect on family life which can compound the issue.

Mental ill-health can also be exasperating for those who are self-employed or sole traders as they do not have access to the same kinds of mental health services which are provided by some organisations.

To resolve this, our recommendation is to require organisations to report on suicides along with relevant information, for example, if the employee had previously reported stress, anxiety or depression; accessed the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP), and so on, along with what action the organisation has taken to reduce the risk in future, including postvention – supporting the colleagues and families of the person who has taken their own life.

The guidance on reporting should be explicit that it is not solely the responsibility of the organisation. However, in reporting the incident it would ensure organisations are made accountable, and therefore take responsibility for the mental wellbeing of their employees. It would also raise awareness of the issue and empower organisations to take action to change the workplace culture and improve mental wellbeing. In addition, the amalgamated data would provide important information, and would track the number of suicides by industry and demonstrate where work should be focused to reduce them.

3. Update HSE’s guidance on writing a ‘health and safety policy’ to include a mental wellbeing strategy and enforce a more stringent inspection and assessment process of organisations aligned to the CQC model within healthcare settings.

¹³ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/riddor/reportable-incidents.htm>

¹⁴ [Suicide by occupation, England - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://www.ons.gov.uk/people-in-work/suicide-by-occupation)

Stress and mental health are included in the HSE’s guidance on risk assessments.¹⁵ However, the question here is whether that information feeds through into an organisation’s resulting health and safety policy. The HSE could update its guidance and templates to include mental wellbeing. It is not uncommon for an employer to not realise their legal duty in this area and therefore have not taken the necessary proactive steps. Enforce a more stringent inspection process of organisations to assess their compliance with the legal duty of care to protect workers from stress at work, by doing a risk assessment and acting on it. For example, HSE organisation visits could include the requirement for the organisation to present their mental wellbeing strategy and demonstrate what processes and actions they are taking, how they are communicating those to their teams, and how they are measuring and reporting any progress, for example, to the Board/Senior Leadership/Shareholders.

4. Update HM Treasury’s annual report writing requirements.

To achieve the above recommendations, the HM Treasury’s Annual Report writing guidance should be updated. In the staff report section, 6.5.45.i, it should be explicit about reporting on mental wellbeing and action taken to support employees.¹⁶

5. Department for Education to ensure that all apprenticeship, further education, A-level and degree courses include a holistic and proactive approach to mental wellbeing to prepare future workforces.

In order to support all young people as they start their journey towards a rewarding career it is imperative that they learn how to identify the signs of stress, anxiety and depression not only in themselves, but also in their fellow students and colleagues. By providing young people with the skills, knowledge and tools, they can help to build safer workplaces for themselves and others.

It is also important that continual professional development delivered by trade bodies and associations also include courses, tools and materials to develop the same skills across all career stages of their workforces.

At Mates in Mind we found that of 550 apprentices surveyed (in 2019):

- 73% had felt stressed at least once in the previous week.
- Only 33% said their employer/colleague would notice signs of mental ill-health in others (the rest said no or unsure).
- 70% had NEVER taken part in any mental health training and yet 91% said they thought training would help them to manage their own mental health.
- Only 55% said they would reach out to someone if they were experiencing stress, depression or anxiety.

In addition, a survey of apprentices which was designed to demonstrate the distance travelled from where they were before the Mates in Mind mental health awareness sessions, to post-training, found that:

	Pre-training*	Post-training*
Are mental health and mental illness the same?	54%	89%
If asked, could you explain what mental health is to another person?	62%	85%
Could you spot the signs of someone who was struggling with a mental health	36%	83%

¹⁵ <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/index.htm>

¹⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1124835/MASTER_DRAFT_2023-24_FReM.pdf

issue?		
Would you feel confident approaching someone you felt was struggling with a mental health issue?	40%	78%
If you realised that someone working with you wasn't feeling great, would you talk to them?	48%	68%
Do you want to talk about mental health at work?	46%	63%

* Percentage represents the number of apprentices responding 'yes' to the question.

This is why we recommend that the Department for Education ensures that mental wellbeing is embedded into all apprenticeship, further education, A-level and degree courses to prepare future workers, line managers and business owners (approximately 35% of apprentices go on to run their own business) and create a legacy of wellbeing.

6. Continue to build and support the cross-government ten-year plan to ensure mental health and wellbeing is at the heart of government.

To ensure that mental wellbeing is at the heart of all areas and stages of life, it is important to empower the cross-government 10 year plan so that all UK residents are protected from harm. For example, in addition to the suggested changes for various departments above, the Department for Business and Trade must lead on improving workplace culture and encouraging large organisations to provide mental health support to their contractors, sole traders and the self-employed. The Department for Health and Social Care must provide a holistic approach to health as mental and physical health are inextricably interrelated. Many physical and musculoskeletal health conditions (e.g., poor or interrupted sleep; back, neck or shoulder pain; eye strain; headaches or migraines etc.) can contribute to an elevated risk of workplace accidents if they affect mood, concentration, coordination or vigilance.

In 2021/22, stress, depression or anxiety accounted for 17.0 million days lost due to work-related ill-health, and musculoskeletal disorders accounted for 7.3 million days lost.¹⁷ Therefore, there is not just human cost associated with mental ill-health, but also a financial one for both government and the private sector. Through raising awareness in the workplace, as well as supporting people back into work, there should be a benefit to all concerned.

For this to work, we also recommend all Government departments should lead by example – assessing current practice, reporting on mental wellbeing and suicide, ensuring Mental Health First Aiders are carefully selected, trained to deliver consistently, fully supported in their role often involving difficult conversations and that all staff know who they are, ensuring teams have a safe and supportive culture, and empowering employees to speak up and seek support without fear.

However, our recommendation goes further, to build on the current policy direction of having a mental health first aid trained employee in every workplace,¹⁸ as there is no evidence to support the success that this approach has had.¹⁹ This is why we advocate for the proactive, preventative strategy as the holistic solution.

¹⁷ [Statistics - Working days lost in Great Britain \(hse.gov.uk\)](https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/working-days-lost-in-great-britain/)

¹⁸ [Mental Health First Aid In The Workplace | Dean Russell MP](#)

¹⁹ [Mental Health First Aid training: widely adopted, but is it evidence-based? - Evidently Cochrane](#)

7. The Government and NHS should run a public awareness campaign.

The Government and NHS currently run a number of awareness campaigns, for example, on the symptoms of stroke (F.A.S.T.), lung cancer (Help us help you), resuscitation (Staying Alive) and heart attacks (chest pains). Building on the Every Mind Matters campaign to support the nation's mental health, the next step would be to provide practical infographics/support on how to identify if someone is facing challenges with their mental health including work related stress.

8. Include a mandatory proactive approach to mental health within all Government awarded contracts as part of the procurement process.

This would need to be holistic and focused on both the preventative and reactive measures working together – not just a tick box exercise focused on whether there is a policy in place and Mental Health First Aiders trained, but how are people going to be supported and barriers removed. Too often contracts are awarded and won on the basis of competitive cost of the project and speed of delivery, both of which can have a tremendous negative impact on those tasked with implementation and the supply chain involved.

Solution

At Mates in Mind for the past six years we have been delivering effective and impactful change across the UK reaching over 100,000 construction workers in the first year by providing the skills, clarity and confidence to employers, their managers and wider workforce on how to raise awareness, improve understanding and confidence to address the stigma of mental ill-health.

We have done this through our established Supporter Programme. As every organisation is different - with its own culture, way of working, provision for mental health and wellbeing - we look to support employers in creating their ideal approach, whilst recognising any existing provision. Our approach includes:

- Assessing where they are – to identify their gaps, vision and how we can work together to achieve this.
- Educating and informing the whole workforce not just a few chosen ones in order to create peer support network.
- Supporting the organisation to create the right programme for them.
- Visibly supporting the framework throughout the organisation with relevant and accessible communication materials.
- Helping to build an evidence base.

A survey of Start the Conversation training course participants (part of the Supporter Programme), found:

- Almost 60% had not participated in any kind of mental health training service before.
- 81% of people felt more comfortable talking about their mental health after the training.
- 91% felt more confident about the role they could play in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of those around them.
- 88% felt more aware of the externally available support services.
- 90% felt more comfortable (after the training) approaching someone if they noticed changes in a colleague with concerns about their wellbeing.

Our work extends beyond our Supporters though, providing training and support materials to those who recognise a need within their organisation.

We also offer an apprentice and college student programme which was developed with the support of B&CE Charitable Trust Mowlem Award. We know that supporting young people will have a huge impact in regard to improving the long-term mental health of the future workers, line managers and business owners, as well as the organisations where they work. The course raises awareness of mental health in construction and builds confidence amongst apprentices in knowing where to seek support for themselves, and how to manage that difficult conversation with colleagues and peers about mental health. The course is delivered to colleges via a Train the Tutor model and therefore becomes embedded in the curriculum and creates a supportive teaching environment able to spot the early signs and provide signposting and support.

Finally, Mates in Mind is working with the Tier 1 Health and Safety Leadership Group to create strategic change across the industry to benefit and include the supply chain in making a difference to the way that the industry operates and reduce the factors that contribute to poor mental health.

Conclusion

Some organisations are doing great work in this area - transforming their own workplaces, raising awareness, removing the stigma and empowering their supply chains. However, there is also still too much variation and inconsistency, with support focused on when someone reaches crisis rather than looking to identify and mitigate the contributing factors. A tick-box approach to mental health with an over-reliance on safety nets is not creating the change we need. Simply having a Mental Health First Aider in every workplace is not going to create the change that is needed around proactive ways to address psychosocial risks. Over 54,000 companies in construction have less than 4 employees and 0.8million are self-employed.

This is why Mates in Mind advocate a holistic model to support an important organisational culture change to a prevention approach, with an empowered management and workforce culture which meets the needs of the business regardless of their size and the individual employee.

About Mates in Mind

Mates in Mind is a leading UK charity raising awareness and addressing the stigma of poor mental health. We promote and lead on the development of positive mental wellbeing within the workplace. Mates in Mind works across industries, focusing on construction, as well as related sectors including transport, logistics, manufacturing, and others.

Mates in Mind aims to provide clear information to employers about the available support and guidance on mental health and wellbeing, and how they can address this within their organisations.

Sarah Meek, Managing Director at Mates in Mind is available to attend and contribute to the oral session of this inquiry.

www.matesinmind.org

