SAMARITANS

Understanding and providing recommendations for good practice mental health provision in the rail industry: an industry wide study
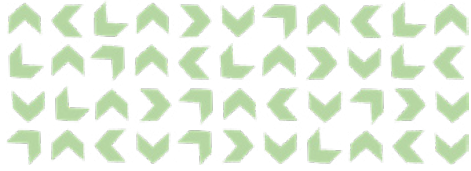
April 2023

MENTAL HEALTH at WORK

Department for Transport

GWR | Great Western Railway

Samaritans

Samaritans is a registered charity working across the UK and Ireland; our vision is that fewer people die by suicide. We're here for anyone struggling to cope, day or night, 365 days a year. Samaritans is not only for the moment of crisis, we are also taking action to prevent the crisis. We listen and provide a human connection so that nobody has to face their struggles alone. In prisons, schools, hospitals and on the rail network, Samaritans are working with people who are going through a difficult time and training others to do the same. We help people find ways to cope and learn the skills to be there for others. And we campaign to make suicide prevention a priority.

samaritans.org

Mental Health at Work

Mental Health at Work are a community interest company, formed in 2015 and have been a wholly owned subsidiary of the Mental Health Foundation since 2018. Our mission is to improve working lives by influencing attitudes and behaviours around workplace mental health.

Mental Health at Work support organisations to build capability around the workplace mental health agenda. This supports natural and open conversations about mental health, helping to create rewarding, fulfilling and inclusive working environments.

If you would like to know more about Mental Health at Work CIC and how we can we can support your organization, please visit our website at mentalhealthatwork.com or email us at team@mentalhealthatwork.com

Great Western Railway (GWR)

Great Western Railway provides high speed, commuter, regional and branch line train services, carrying commuters, leisure and business customers across the Great Western rail franchise area, which includes South Wales, the West Country, the Cotswolds, and large parts of Southern England. Alongside Department for Transport, Great Western Railway have commissioned this study.

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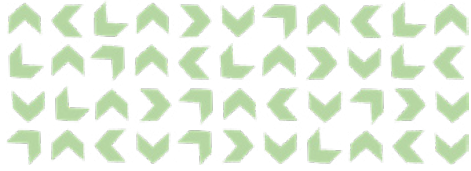Maggi Rose, Head of Evolution, Mental Health at Work

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Contents

Photo credit: Richa Mitra/Samaritans

Forewords

Given the enormous challenges all our staff and managers face every day on this busy and demanding railway, the wellbeing of our colleagues needs to be taken every bit as seriously as we do railway safety. We have created this study as an opportunity to focus on this and look forward to considering what more we can do, through the recommendations that are highlighted within this report.

The wellbeing of our colleagues is so important, and this study is a further sign of our commitment to promoting an environment that supports positive mental health and supports colleagues experiencing trauma or mental illness. We look forward to working with the results from this study, through a cross-industry approach that will allow us to share best practice, learn from one another and provide the best support we can.
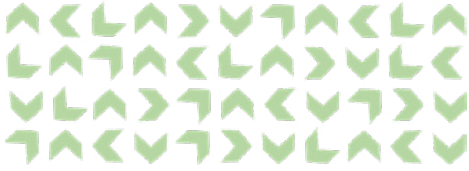
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Definitions

Mental health

Mental health is a state of wellbeing in which an individual can realise his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and can contribute to his or her community. We all have mental health – it is an integral and essential component of health.

Mental health problem/issue

A mental health problem is when difficult experiences or feelings go on for a long time and affect our ability to enjoy and live our lives in the way we want. They include the painful feelings and thoughts that we all have at times – including periods of sadness, hopelessness and fear.

Mental illness

A mental illness or mental health disorder is an illness that affects that way people think, feel, behave, or interact with others. There are many types of mental illnesses, with different signs and symptoms. Anyone can experience mental illness.

Trauma

Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as harmful or life threatening. While unique to the individual, generally the experience of trauma can cause lasting adverse effects and limit their ability to function and achieve mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being.

Wellbeing

Wellbeing encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose. CIPD identified seven inter-related 'domains' of employee wellbeing: 1. Health; 2. Good work; 3. Values/Principles; 4. Collective/Social; 5. Personal growth; 6. Good lifestyle choices; 7. Financial wellbeing.

Stigma

Stigma involves negative attitudes or discrimination against someone based on a distinguishing characteristic, such as a mental illness, health condition or disability.

Train Operating Company (TOC)

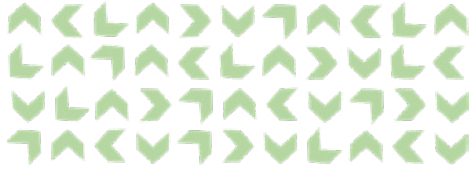Train Operating Companies run rail passenger services. They do this by leasing and managing stations from Network Rail.

Freight Operating Company (FOC)

Companies that use the rail network to move their goods.

Frontline staff

Any person who interacts directly with customers or clients in the workplace. These staff are typically the primary point of contact between a customer or a public member and an organization.

Executive summary

Samaritans and Mental Health at Work have collaborated with colleagues from across the rail sector to develop an industry-wide study on promoting and supporting positive mental health within the rail industry. The study aims to provide good practice recommendations for mental health provision, raise awareness of the support available for staff, and destigmatise conversations around mental health. The study used a cross-sectional research design that combined a sector-wide survey of rail staff with focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews.

Society depends on workers in the rail industry, who face unique challenges and risk factors that can negatively impact their mental health and overall wellbeing. These include heavy workloads, changes in the industry, exposure to potentially traumatic incidents, financial concerns, lone working, and shift working, all of which are significant contributors to mental health issues among rail employees.

The psychological safety and wellbeing of rail industry employees must be given the same level of attention as their physical safety. The sector faces constant change, with recent industrial disputes and uncertainty and change on the horizon with the transition to Great British Railways. Mental health-related absences have cost the sector over £1.3 billion since the start of 2019[1] making it crucial to provide support to employees. Investing in staff mental health has proven to be cost-effective, with employers receiving an average £5 return for every £1 spent on wellbeing support[2].

Support available

There is evidence of many positive mental health initiatives across the sector and support that staff find helpful includes reviewing and managing workloads and working hours, having a platform or opportunity to open up and talk, learning stra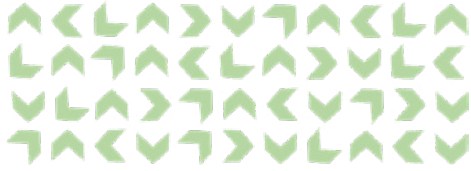tegies to support themselves and hearing from others who have had similar issues. Despite these positive initiatives, our research indicates that rail staff lack awareness and understanding of available support and face various barriers to seeking help. Additionally, our study highlights inconsistencies in the availability and quality of support services across the sector.

Barriers to seeking support

Over half of employees continued working despite experiencing mental health changes that affected their job performance, while 44 per cent did not seek any form of support. Our research revealed several obstacles that prevented staff from seeking help through their organisation. These barriers included distrust of available support, stigma surrounding mental health, worries about the impact on career advancement, concerns about disappointing others and fears of being taken off the job.

Role of managers

Many workers felt their managers did not know how to provide support for mental health and it was reactive, rather than proactive, whereas managers did not feel confident providing it. Our research highlighted that managers unfortunately do not always have the time available or confidence in the skills to talk with staff

and are already under a lot of pressure in their roles, which has been amplified by heavy workloads and recent staff shortages. Staff recognised that everyone should take responsibility for mental health support and this should not fall solely on managers. Instead, all staff members should receive mental health awareness training, which would encourage them to seek support when they need it and signpost each other. Moreover, senior leaders must play a critical role in supporting managers to lead this change.

Trauma

Many rail staff face exposure to a wide range of potentially traumatic incidents in their roles, affecting their mental health. Almost two-thirds of staff experienced verbal abuse, and almost a fifth experienced physical abuse while working for their employer. The level of abuse and threatening behaviour experienced by rail staff can be severe. Traumatic incidents are not always dealt with in the best way, and some staff feel there is a lack of concern for staff welfare when such incidents happen. Organisations need to acknowledge and address all trauma in the workplace, including those that are less severe but still highly distressing such as bullying, discrimination and the pressure of service disruption.
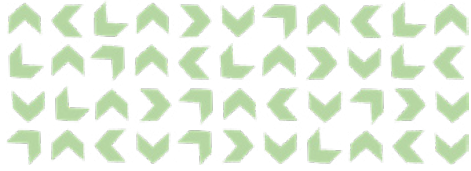
Cost of grievance

The volume of complaints and grievances seen within the rail sector is notably high, with 43 per cent of staff indicating that they have been involved in one in their current role. These procedures have a cost for individuals and organisations and often exacerbate staff mental illness. In many cases grievance procedures were poorly

managed, were often extensively long and drawn out, and communication throughout the process was poor. Organisations must look at how they can intervene early before situations escalate and also consider rewriting grievance procedures as a "resolution policy," with the focus being on resolving the issues rather than on the grievance[3].

Recommendations

We have made a series of recommendations for organisations to consider to improve the mental health and wellbeing of their staff. The study's findings suggest that there is a pressing need for organisations to raise awareness of and improve the support available for staff, ensure they have an effective strategy for mental health, build and foster a positive and inclusive culture, regularly review and evaluate support programs and services, and provide training and tools for managers to support staff. Addressing key drivers of poor mental health, acknowledging and addressing all trauma in the workplace, and improving grievances and complaints procedures will benefit staff and organisations.

This report underscores the crucial importance of prioritising mental health within the rail industry and outlines key steps that can be taken to improve mental health provision and support for employees. By implementing the recommendations provided in this report, the rail industry can strive towards creating a safer, healthier and more productive work environment, for all its employees.

Introduction

Samaritans and Mental Health at Work have collaborated with colleagues from across the rail sector to develop an industry-wide study on promoting and supporting positive mental health within the rail industry.

The UK rail industry is broad and complex, encompassing train and freight operators, infrastructure managers, contractors, rolling stock suppliers and leasing companies. Society depends on workers in this industry, however, they face some unique challenges and risk factors, including long hours, shift working, exposure to traumatic incidents and workplace violence. Responding to disturbing and demanding situations is often part of their role, giving them a direct link with vulnerable people. This can lead to a higher risk of feeling vulnerable themselves.
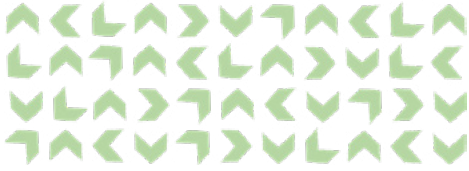
These risk factors contribute to the mental health and wellbeing challenges facing the rail sector as a whole. A recent survey by the Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB) found that rail employees experience a 1.5 times higher rate of anxiety compared to the rates seen in the general population. The survey also found that 43 per cent of rail workers have a mental health issue, and more than half of those said they experienced psychological or mental health issues because of their work in the rail industry[4].

The psychological safety and wellbeing of staff needs to be taken just as seriously as physical safety in the sector. Delivering a high-quality railway service depends on a workforce that feels supported, cared for and appreciated for their daily endeavours.

Throughout the pandemic, the rail industry was almost an invisible frontline sector as they continued to operate the UK network with a fraction of the acknowledgment or awareness shown to other sectors. Compounding the impact of over two years of working in pandemic conditions, the sector now faces further disruption through recent industrial disputes as well as uncertainty and change on the horizon in the form of the transition to Great British Railways. The rail industry appears to face constant change, and thus the study comes at a crucial time; support for the sector is needed now more than ever.

This study aims to provide good practice recommendations for mental health provision, so that the industry can raise awareness of the support available for staff and how they can access it. It will aim to highlight existing barriers, as well as encourage a culture shift to destigmatise conversations around mental health.

The rail industry's ambition is that all rail colleagues have the support they need for their mental health and wellbeing, and that positive mental health is at the heart of all that they say and do in the industry across all grades and job roles. Last year saw the creation of the Mental Health Charter for the rail industry (see page 9), which for the first time provided a framework to help promote, manage, and support workforce mental wellbeing. The charter has been a positive and well-received initiative for the rail sector that the study will build upon, backed up by evidence of successes within other sectors and organisations.

Introduction

Since the beginning of 2019, the sector's costs for mental health-related absences have topped £1.3 billion, excluding administration or replacement worker fees[5]. Supporting staff with their mental health is proven to be cost effective for employers. Recent analysis by Deloitte has revealed that employers that invest in mental health support for their workforce can make significant financial gains, with an average £5 return for every £1 spent on wellbeing support[6].

66 Safe, healthy and inclusive workplaces not only enhance mental and physical health but likely also reduce absenteeism, improve work performance and productivity, boost staff morale and motivation, and minimize conflict between colleagues. When people have good mental health, they are better able to cope with the stresses of life, realize their own abilities, learn and work well and contribute actively to their communities. And when people have good working conditions, their mental health is protected. 99
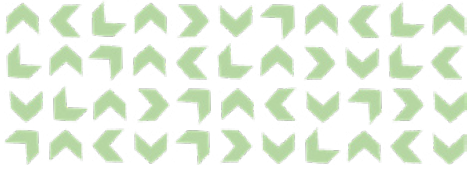
WHO Guidelines on Mental Health at Work, 2022[7]

Study objectives:

- **Provide the rail sector with a comprehensive understanding of good practice mental health provision that they can build from.**

- **Support the development of a workplace in which everyone is confident to have natural, open conversations about mental health and knows how to signpost for support.**

- **Present an understanding of the issues and barriers to mental health within the rail sector.**

- **Deliver recommendations that are actionable and adaptable across the different organisations within the rail sector.**

Photo credit: Steve Tollerton/Samaritans

Railway Mental Health Charter

Launched in May 2021, the Railway Mental Health Charter (RMHC) is designed to provide the railway industry with a simple yet robust framework for promoting and supporting the mental wellbeing of its workforce. The framework is aligned with good practice and provides targeted actions for improving mental health in rail organisations. The RMHC aims to support the industry in creating an open and inclusive culture where all colleagues are empowered to ask for support.

The RMHC provides organisations with access to a range of resources and support, including:

- A set of principles and standards that organisations can use to guide their efforts in promoting and supporting mental wellbeing.

- A network of industry mental health and wellbeing leaders who can provide guidance and support to organisations.

- Tools and resources, including training and awareness-raising materials, to help organisations implement the principles and standards set out in the RMHC.
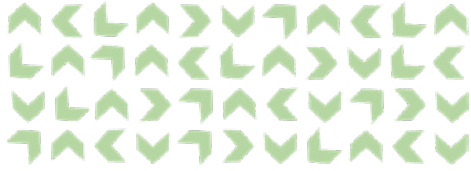
The RMHC is free for organisations to use and there is no cost associated with membership. Members are provided with support to develop a plan of action that suits their organisation, and are then responsible for defining, delivering and measuring their plans, including making use of the opportunity to engage with other RMHC members.

Since its launch, the RMHC has already been signed by more than 100 organisations in the railway industry. This demonstrates a clear commitment from the industry to promote and support mental wellbeing in the workplace.

The Railway Mental Health Charter (RMHC) (rssb.co.uk)

Photo credit: Gary Johnson – TRiM Practitioner at Southeastern

Methodology

This was a cross-sectional research study combining a quantitative survey with qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews. This study received full ethical approval from the Samaritans Research Ethics Board in June 2022. Highlighted below is an overview of the study's research objectives and the research methods used to achieve them.

Research objectives:

- **To explore the support, resources and interventions available for rail staff mental health and wellbeing.**

- **To understand staff awareness and experience of mental health support within their organisations.**

- **To understand the issues and barriers to mental health within the rail sector.**
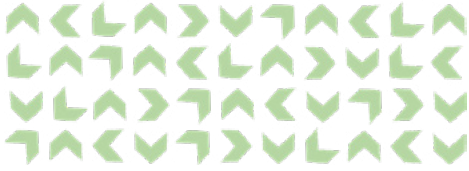
Literature review

At the start of the project we conducted an extensive literature review to examine and synthesise the existing research in this area. This allowed us to draw out key themes and identify any gaps in knowledge. As well as this initial review, we ensured that we kept informed of any new and emerging research as the study was being conducted.

Survey of staff working within the UK rail sector

An online survey was carried out among 1,773 staff working within the UK rail sector between June and August 2022. The survey sample was self-selecting and promoted through a wide range of rail sector organisations and across LinkedIn, mailouts and sector newsletters. The survey accepted all employees who identified as railway industry workers aged 18 or over. Before participation, which was anonymous and voluntary, the study's purpose and aims were outlined and the lead researcher's contact details and available support services were provided. Participants were asked to provide informed consent before their participation.

The survey has drawn a large sample from across the rail industry and therefore gives confidence that the data provides a representative picture. It is important to note, however, that not all organisations within the rail sector are represented in the survey.

Throughout this report, percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole and therefore may not add up to exactly 100 per cent.
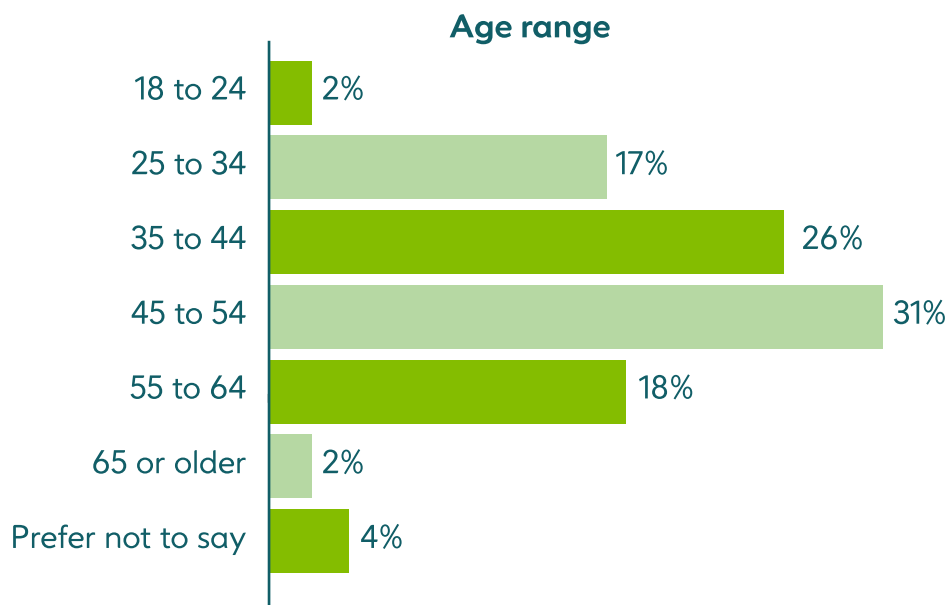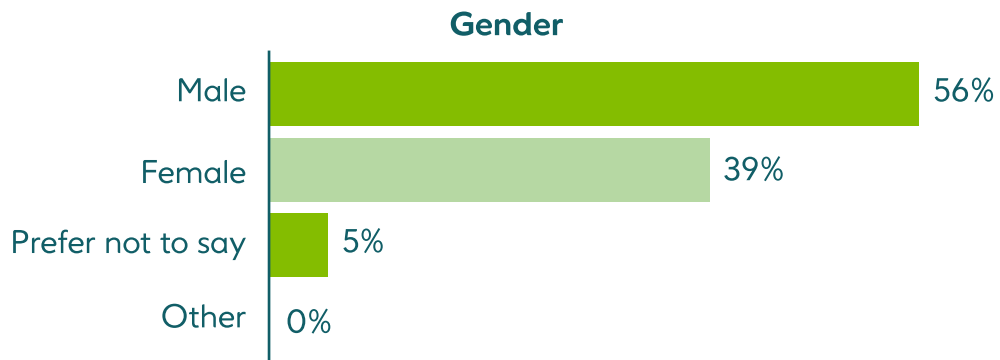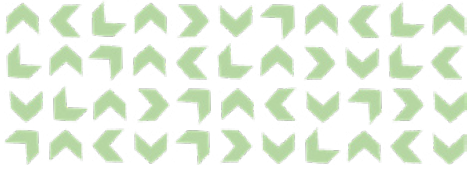
Respondent Profile

- 56% of the sample were male

- 57% of participants were aged between 35 and 54 years

- The majority of participants described themselves as White British (87%)

The age and ethnicity profile of the survey group largely mirrors the profile reported in rail sector data provided by the National Skills Agency. However, the proportion of female respondents is higher than that seen in the industry. It's typical for research surveys to exhibit a greater female participation rate and this has been taken into account when analysing the results.

Only results that showed a statistical significance in the survey analysis are reported throughout this report.

Gender

Male	56%
Female	39%
Prefer not to say	5%
Other	0%

Age range

18 to 24	2%
25 to 34	17%
35 to 44	26%
45 to 54	31%
55 to 64	18%
65 or older	2%
Prefer not to say	4%

Respondents were from 56 different organisations across the rail sector, including train operators, freight operators, contractors, suppliers and governing bodies.
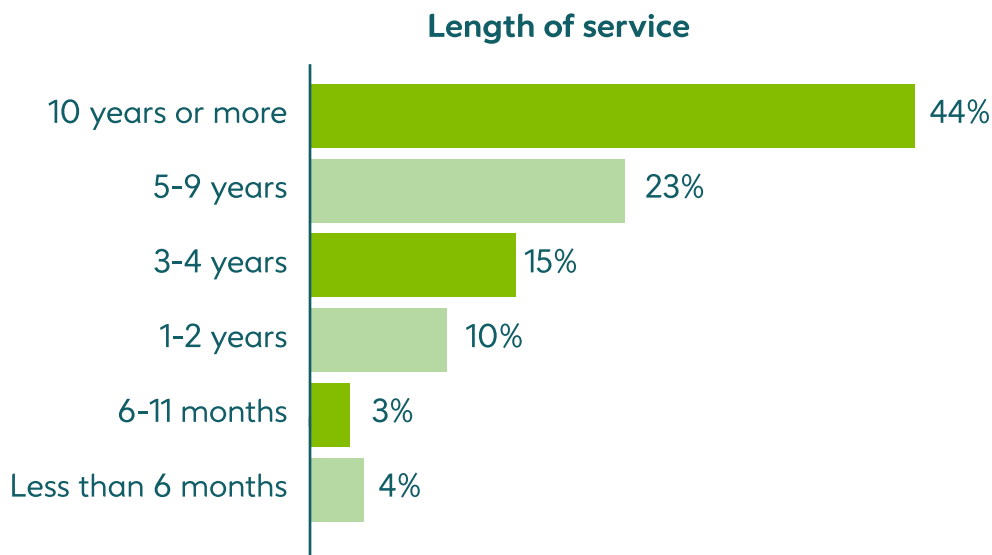
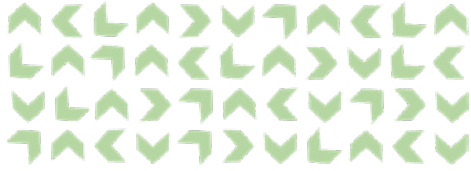| Organisation Type	%
Train Operator (TOC)	65%
Governing Body	20%
Freight Operator (FOC)	7%
Other	5%
Contractor	3%

More than two thirds of respondents (67%) had worked at their organisation for five years or more, whilst 44 per cent had worked at their organisation for more than ten years. A common observation in the rail industry is that many staff stay working there for long periods of time, often 20 to 30 years or more.

Responses were from staff working in over 100 different job roles. The highest proportion were Train Drivers (9%) and Customer Service Assistants (8%). We've grouped the job roles together by job type as follows:

Focus group discussions with staff working within the UK rail sector

We held ten focus group discussions with 54 rail sector staff during August and September 2022. We recruited participants from a range of organisations across the industry with a wide variety of job roles and job levels. This was to ensure we heard a broad range of views and experiences that were reflective of the rail industry. By comparing the responses of different groups, we were able to identify areas of consensus and disagreement, which provided additional insights. Staff were split into groups with similar roles and responsibilities to increase the likelihood of shared experience and thus allowing them to feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts.

Length of service

Length of service	%
10 years or more	44%
5-9 years	23%
3-4 years	15%
1-2 years	10%
6-11 months	3%
Less than 6 months	4%

The groups were split as follows:

- **3 x groups with frontline staff**
- **2 x groups with professional service staff**
- **2 x groups with senior leaders**
- **1 x group with middle managers**
- **1 x group with occupational health staff**
- **1 x group with Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs)**

Participants were recruited by indicating interest when completing the online survey and via additional communications inviting them to take part, such as mailouts from contacts across the sector.

Most of the focus groups were held virtually via Zoom to allow us to easily reach a broad range of staff in different geographical locations across the UK. The three focus groups with front line staff were held in-person to ensure those staff without regular access to a PC or laptop were able to participate and share their views. The in-person focus groups were held at three different locations with large transport hubs: York, Milton Keynes and London.
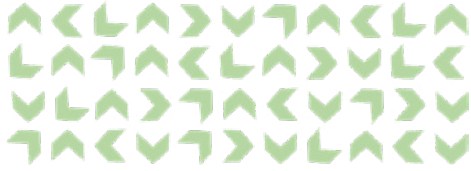
Interviews with representatives from Transport Unions

We held three in-depth interviews with representatives from three of the largest trade unions in the sector – ASLEF, TSSA and RMT. All interviewees held roles within their unions with a focus on staff mental health and wellbeing. With industrial action currently taking place across the sector, we particularly wanted to understand more about its impact on rail staff.

Steering group

A stakeholder steering group was also created. It provided advice and guidance throughout the study, feeding into the research design, findings, and compilation of recommendations. The group was formed of representatives from a range of organisations within the rail industry whose work impacts on wellbeing.
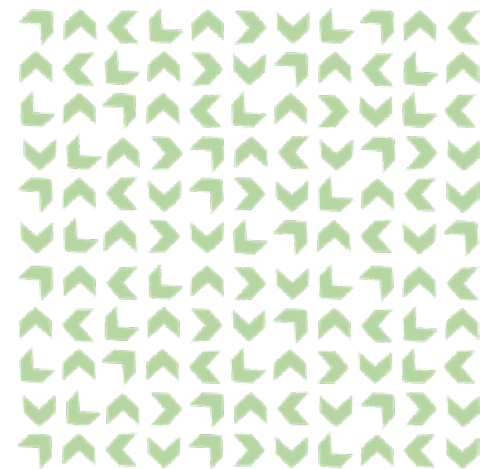
Main findings

What support is currently available?

Half of all respondents said that they did not know whether their organisation has a strategic plan for the mental health agenda. This was higher for those working within freight (60%). Similarly, The Rail Benevolent Fund (RBF) conducted a survey in July 2022 asking rail staff what support they were aware of that is currently available to them within rail companies – 80 per cent were unsure or felt that there was no support available[8]. Both of these findings suggest that awareness of what support is available within the sector needs to be improved.

Does your organisation have a strategic plan for the mental health agenda?

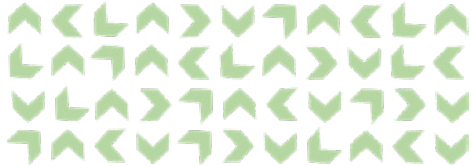|	
I don't know	50%
Yes	40%
No	8%
No, but we are in the process of creating one	2%

Those who didn't know that their organisation had a strategic plan for the mental health agenda were more likely to be at intermediate or entry level in their job role. However, the proportion of senior managers and above who didn't know was still high, at 28 per cent.

Over a third (35%) of rail staff said they'd had no training or support around mental health in their current role. More than a quarter of those were middle managers.

The most frequently cited training courses staff had attended were Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training (21%), Samaritans' training on suicide prevention and/or trauma support (10%) and mental health awareness training (3%).

In addition to the feedback we had from staff on support currently available, we also had details from six rail organisations, represented on our steering group, of the mental health support that they currently offer to their employees.

Positive initiatives across the sector

We asked staff what positive or impactful initiatives they had experienced or heard about mental health within their organisation in the last few years. Many different resources and schemes were mentioned, including Wellbeing Wednesdays, coffee mornings, mental health awareness days, financial wellbeing webinars, Rail Wellbeing Live, team support and Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs).

Rail Wellbeing Live is the biggest health and wellbeing movement in the history of the rail industry. It was set up in 2020 by a cross industry group with a mission to improve the health and wellbeing of everyone who works in rail. It is an annual event that brings people together from across the sector, to understand how they can become fitter and more resilient as individuals and organisations[9].

Wellbeing Wednesdays are held on a livestream for the rail industry on the first Wednesday of every month. They offer insightful and practical advice, covering many aspects of health and wellbeing including sleep, diet, exercise, stress, and money worries[10].
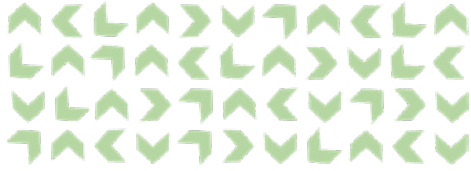
Many staff felt that although support was available to them, it wasn't suitable or effective:

> 66 I've heard of plenty of initiatives around mental health but feel none are aimed at people like me. I can't take time off and I work alone so I get no support. They might be positive for office-based staff but not for me. 99

Many felt the support on offer was reactive rather than proactive, failing to address the root causes of workplace stress and appearing to be more of a box-ticking exercise. There was also an observation from some respondents that staff are not given the same level of welfare concern as passengers are.

> 66 It usually feels more like a tick in the box exercise than anything meaningful. 99

> 66 All efforts focus on signposting where support is. There are no preventative measures to assess and remediate the underlying route cause. 99

66 I do think there are a lot of people doing great things, but the day-to-day support is not there. 99

66 Mental health support is just seen as and treated as a process by many senior leadership teams – there is no concern for the individual. 99

66 There was no support offered by my employer. The focus was put on my ability to fulfil my role and not my ability to cope with the stress I was experiencing. 99

66 More needs to be done by my company to tackle root causes of work stress to try to prevent a lot of suffering in the work place. They are reactive and not proactive. 99

66 Working for a team who are open and supportive of mental health is invaluable. 99

66 Financial wellbeing webinars were positive in helping me to set a budget. The cost-of-living crisis had been affecting me significantly, causing me to worry about money constantly. 99
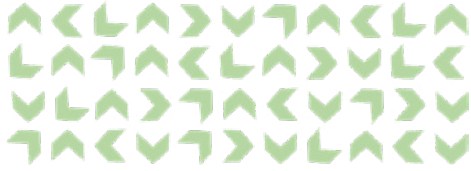
Employee Assistance Programs (EAP)

Many rail organisations provide an employee assistance program for staff, which offers face-to-face, telephone or online counselling and support on both personal and work-related issues, with the aim of increasing staff wellbeing and productivity.

Counselling through EAP is most often limited to only six sessions, which many staff felt was not enough to adequately help them. Others felt that the EAP service wasn't specialised enough for them and their needs. There were also concerns around the confidentiality of EAP services, with some staff mistrusting them for fear that they were linked to their employer.

66 EAP feels like a box ticking exercise. 99

66 EAP can be a lottery – some are terrible. 99

> 66 Six sessions through the EAP wasn't long enough to get any real analysis, plus it was over the phone so felt impersonal. 99

> 66 EAP is often used as a sticking plaster but isn't the right support for everyone. Some organisations are moving away from EAP for these reasons. 99

For some rail organisations EAP is seen as the only solution for supporting staff wellbeing. However, it is not enough on its own and is not suitable for everyone. EAPs are likely to work more effectively as part of a wider wellbeing support strategy and as a starting point for further help.

The Employee Assistance Professionals Association (EAPA) has recently urged employers to remember that EAPs were not intended to be the whole solution to employee wellbeing, and that they were designed as brief intervention counselling programmes to support employees in the short term[11].

Peer Support

Employee's offering support to one another in a mutual space in the workplace. Peer support enables employees to talk to others who have a shared experience.

Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs)

Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs) are trained by MHFA England in how to identify, understand and help someone who may be experiencing a mental health issue. MHFA training gives people the knowledge and skills to spot signs of poor mental health, be confident to start a conversation and signpost a person to appropriate support[12].

In this research study we heard from many staff who have been trained as MHFAs, as well as those who have MHFAs available to them as a support option. We held a separate focus group discussion for MHFAs, and a fifth of survey respondents had received MHFA training in their current role.

Many rail organisations have embraced the MHFA initiative and have put staff forward for training. However, the effectiveness of MHFAs appears to be inconsistent across the sector. Feedback from staff in our research suggests that more needs to be done regarding awareness, understanding the role once trained, and assessing the impact of rolling out MHFA training.

Only three per cent of staff said they had sought support from an MHFA when they noticed a change in their mental health. There appears to be a lot of confusion from staff regarding who MHFAs are and what their role is. We heard how contact lists for MHFAs were often not updated regularly, or even provided in some cases. Many staff feel there is a lack of awareness and understanding from senior leaders regarding the role of MHFAs and how they should be used.
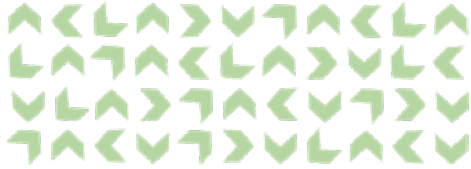
66 I think there are a couple of staff nominated to offer support, but I don't know who they are, what they look like or how to access them. 99

We heard from a senior leader who believes that in their organisation, and in others, the recruitment of MHFAs is problematic. In some cases the wrong people have been recruited to the role purely to fill a quota, leading to them not being used effectively. This concern was shared by many staff across the sector, who believe a stricter selection process is needed for recruitment of MHFAs.

66 Managers volunteer staff to be MHFAs who don't have the desire or interest in the role. Once again it feels like another tick box exercise. 99

The name "Mental Health First Aider" was identified as a potential barrier by some staff members who found the term "first aider" to be unclear and potentially misleading, implying that the role is limited to emergency situations only. Therefore, alternative terms such as "ally" or "champion" may be more suitable for individuals who are trained to offer continuous assistance to those with mental health issues.
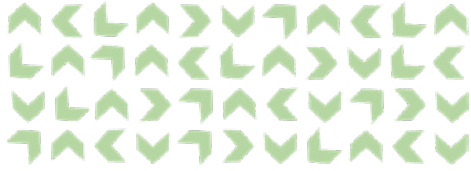
There was also confusion from staff regarding the difference between MHFAs and other initiatives, such as Wellbeing Champions.

66 I know MHFAs exist but I'm just not sure who they are or how they can help. We have Wellbeing Champions now too and I don't know what the difference is between the two. 99

There needs to be better signposting and clearer communication to improve the understanding of the role and trust in MHFAs. This will help staff to feel more comfortable approaching and confiding in them.

Many MHFAs felt that they were not provided with adequate support to fulfil their role, explaining how they were left to their own devices once trained, without any leadership, guidance, or ongoing training.

Main findings

> **I have been trained as a mental first aider, as were a number of other people. We were very excited to get involved in making change but have been left to our own devices. I did guides for managers and proposed ideas but to no avail. Everyone has lost enthusiasm without leadership over wellbeing. We are not kept informed with updates and don't know where it is going.**

MHFAs are not often accessible or visible to those in the industry who work shift patterns or work in isolation. Many MHFAs work 9-5 office hours but shift workers often need support outside these hours.

The support offered by MHFAs tends to be reactive rather than proactive, and so they are only part of the a mental health strategy. Despite this, many organisations seem to rely on them with few alternative support options.

MHFAs need clear guidance and boundaries for their role, as well as ongoing support and supervision.

We heard some incredible stories from MHFAs during the focus group discussions; specifically, how their personal experiences with mental illness had given them the desire to help others, and how passionate they were about supporting their colleagues. The decision to become a MHFA is often based on personal experience, but it doesn't necessarily guarantee suitability for the role. While this self-selection process can have positive outcomes, it can also have negative implications, as individuals may be driven by their own experiences, both positively and negatively.

> **The honesty of a MHFA's own experience is invaluable, it makes them much more approachable.**

Mental Health Allies

MHaW Allies® are trained by Mental Health at Work to listen and signpost for support where it's needed. Mental Health at Work's (MHaW) programmes are tailored to an individual organisation's needs, taking into consideration different operational, cultural and demographic requirements, avoiding a 'one size fits all' approach[13].
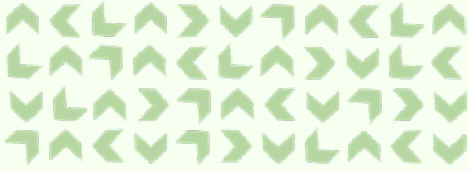
Case Study: EssenceMediacom Mental Health Allies

Providing a safe space for everyone to talk about workplace mental health

In 2018, following a series of events on mental health, EssenceMediacom saw a growing demand to talk about mental health at work, particularly amongst their younger staff members, which increased pressure on the HR team.

They recognised that raising awareness and providing access to support through an Employee Assistance Programme was not enough. Employees wanted an avenue to talk to someone they trusted for a confidential, non-judgmental, and open conversation, which could support improved access to support at the right time if needed, and before the issue moved to a crisis position.

Working in partnership with Mental Health at Work CIC, the Mental Health Allies programme was launched throughout the London office with carefully selected volunteers (representative of the employee population at EssenceMediacom across all aspects of diversity and hierarchy). Allies were trained with the skills to be expert listeners and signposters, who could talk about anything that might be impacting mental health, wherever they were needed. The role had clear boundaries to ensure that there was no expectation of diagnoses, counselling, or problem solving, and a safe escalation process was established. Allies clearly identified themselves on the company Wellbeing Hub through their email signature and by wearing a green lanyard. They became activists for the mental health agenda across the organisation, and they provided a safe space for anyone who needed to talk.

The Ally population has continued to grow, extending across EssenceMediacom worldwide and within the parent company

WPP in 2021, ensuring a network of Allies across all UK agencies, accessible to any WPP employee and across selected US and Singapore agencies. This enables smaller agencies to offer the service, both in house and with support across the network to provide choice and depth.
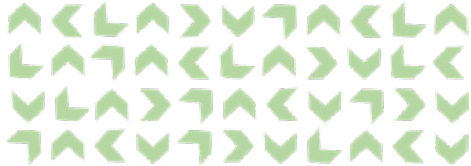
The network does not sit still and continues to evolve with regular Ally check-ins to share themes and signposting, masterclasses to build on existing skills, a Teams channel for resources and communications, and a programme of refresher training (beginning in 2023).

The network is both used and valued – the MediaCom Global Ally Survey of August 2022 showed that 75 per cent of Allies have had conversations with colleagues about their Mental Health, and 80 per cent have seen the Ally programme promoted in their local office.

The programme has become an established part of the employee offer at this company from recruitment, onboarding, and retention, supporting the preventative role around mental health in this demanding business.

> ❝ I like to think of the Mental Health Allies as insurance or vehicle breakdown cover. You might never need them, but they're always there if you do. ❞
>
> **MediaCom UK Ally**

Wellbeing Champions

A Wellbeing Champion is somebody who can provide an informal listening ear for colleagues, helping them to find further support or talk things through outside of the line management structure (RSSB website).

Wellbeing champions have been introduced in some organisations, however, there is some confusion from staff over the difference between these and MHFAs.

Mental Health Charter

The Railway Mental Health Charter (RMHC) provides the rail industry with a framework for promoting and supporting staff mental health. The RMHC is free for organisations to use and there is no cost associated with membership. Members are provided with support to develop a plan of action that suits their organisation and the opportunity to engage with other RMHC members.

Training

The main types of mental health training currently available to rail staff are:

- Mental health awareness training
- Resilience training/workshops
- Mental health training for managers
- Trauma support training

Often, training or awareness courses are provided during induction, but this misses those already in post and, if not refreshed, can be forgotten further down the line.

There is wide disparity between what is available in terms of training from one organisation to another, and we do not know whether training is compulsory or what the uptake of training is.

Trauma support

Many rail organisations offer support to staff following a traumatic incident and training for staff in handling trauma. However, once again, the level and effectiveness of support differs greatly between organisations.

We will discuss trauma and the effect it may have on staff mental health in more detail later in this report.
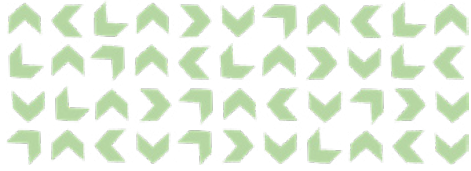
Other support and initiatives

Other support options accessed by staff included counselling, support helplines, and online resources such as e-learning and webinars. Other mental health initiatives that staff are aware of included mental health charities, menopause networks, and Mental Health Advocates.

What Works Well

When asked what aspects of support had been helpful for their mental health, the following were cited most often by staff:

- Reviewing and help managing workload
- Reviewing working hours
- Having a platform or opportunity to open up and talk
- Feeling that they were being listened to
- knowing that support is available if needed
- Learning strategies to support themselves
- Knowing that others are having or have had similar issues

66 Just talking, managing my working hours and reviewing my workload supported my mental wellbeing. 99

66 Having a conversational outlet and an ear to listen to what I had to say… really helped me process my feelings. 99

66 It was good to talk and gain perspective. Sometimes you just need someone to listen, be non-judgemental, and feel that you are being supported. 99
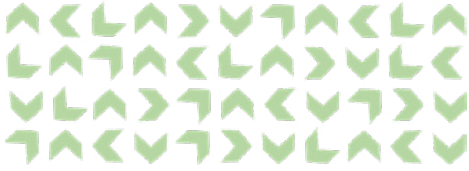
66 I was able to reduce my hours until I was feeling much better, which meant I didn't have to go off on long term sick. 99

66 Just being able to let off steam, which we don't get much chance to. Nobody asks us if we are ok, nor do we get much chance to air our views to the senior team. 99

66 Talking to others made me realise that we all face this same issues. It is hard to see that when you don't have much contact with others. 99

Organisations could consider working with staff to review their workload and working hours if pressure begins to impact their mental health. By doing so, organisations can identify where issues are causing undue stress on the employee and take steps to address them.

Organisations could increase communication channels and access to these and also encourage active listening amongst staff both of which have clear benefits for employee mental health.
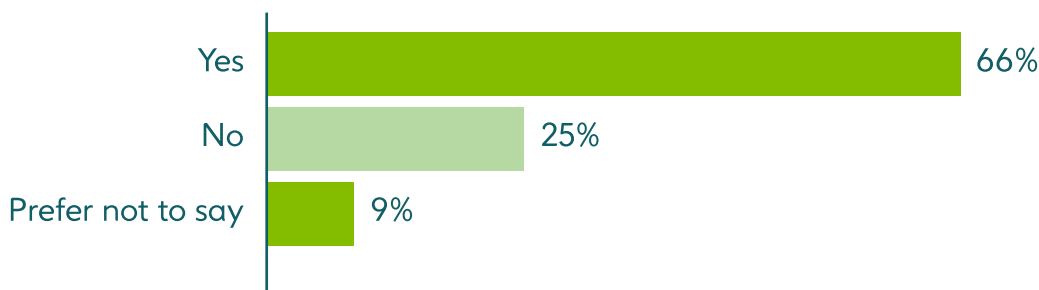
Key drivers of poor mental health

Two thirds (66%) of rail staff surveyed said they had experienced a change in their mental health that impacted their ability to carry out their work in their current role.

Have you ever experienced a change in your mental health that impacted your ability to work?

Yes	66%
No	25%
Prefer not to say	9%

We uncovered some key drivers of poor mental health when we spoke to staff during the focus group discussions, many of which related specifically to participants' job roles. We will explore these key drivers below.
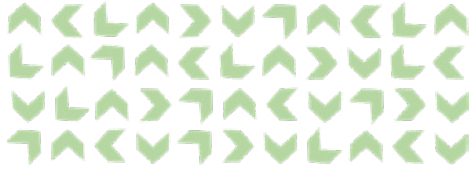
Heavy workloads and lack of resource

Within both the survey and the focus group discussions, participants told us that workloads for many staff in the sector were particularly heavy at the moment and had increased recently to the point of causing stress and burnout. The main reason for the heavy workloads was attributed by many to a lack of staff resource. Some people directly referenced redundancies in their teams, which created gaps in skill sets and capacity that aren't being acknowledged, resulting in fewer people having to produce the same output.

66 It feels like I'm doing three people's jobs at once. 99

66 There is more voluntary severance on the horizon, which means that workloads will get worse before they get better. 99

66 There is an expectation to do the extra hours and it's frowned upon if you don't. 99

66 The issue is the current work practices contribute to stress, anxiety and mental health. 99

> ❝ I have had mental health problems for years and they are getting progressively worse mainly because of my job and the incredibly high stress levels and low morale. ❞

Work-related stress

The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines work-related stress as 'the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them at work'[14].

Burnout

Burnout is a state of physical and emotional exhaustion resulting from chronic workplace stress. It is characterised by three dimensions: 1) feelings of exhaustion or depletion; 2) increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativity/cynicism; 3) reduced professional efficacy[15]. (World Health Organisation)

There is a danger that dealing with such heavy workloads for a sustained period can lead to burnout, often without warning. Burnout can manifest as a mental or physical breakdown, which may result in a long period of sickness absence, or even resignation, as a further attempt to hide mental health problems. A recent Deloitte survey found that key workers reported more signs of burnout than non-key workers and were more likely to report that they had intentionally left their job in the past year, or were planning to leave in the next 12 months due to a decline in mental health.

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provide guidance for employers on how to protect workers from stress at work: Managing stress at work
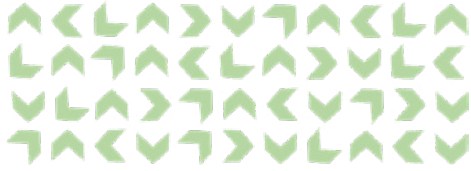
Changes in the industry

There has been significant change within the rail industry recently, particularly post-pandemic. Those highlighted by participants in this study as having a negative effect on staff mental health include:

- changes in the volume, type and travel patterns of passengers
- changes in procedures and working practices
- ongoing industrial action within the rail industry
- an increase in the number of staff redundancies
- reduced funding across the sector.

These changes have led to job insecurity, stress, and low morale among many rail staff. Managers reported hearing more and more from staff worried about redundancies, workload, and finances in particular.

> ❝ I've noticed a big difference in staff mental health over the last few years, people are much more stressed now. There is so much change and uncertainty. ❞

> There is lots of financial stress for staff as they lose pay during the rail strikes. There is a lot of uncertainty and worry about redundancies from staff.

(When asked what they would consider traumatic in a work setting:)

> Working in a world of uncertainty with GBR and ambiguity whilst proposed changes are being consulted on.

The introduction of the 'Right Time Railway' metrics in 2019 has been a big change for operational and frontline staff. Some staff expressed concern that organisations have a greater focus on these metrics than they do on the safety and welfare of staff.

Right Time Railway is a relatively new set of metrics introduced in April 2019 that reports cancellations and measures trains at each station to within a minute.

> Staff are constantly under review – this is now part of the culture. It puts a lot of pressure and stress on staff, there's a lack of understanding from managers regarding the affect this has on staff.
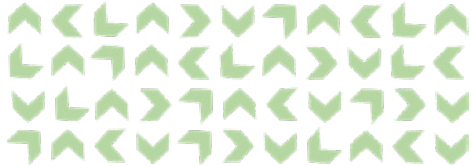
> Many frontline staff are terrified of what they do because there is so much that could go wrong. There is a lot of stress and worry about all the checks that need to be carried out.

> There is a higher rate of staff turnover nowadays as people don't understand what is expected of them when they are recruited – the level of stress and pressure.

Effective communication is crucial for leaders in guiding staff through a period of change. It's important to ensure that staff understand the reasons behind the change and how it will affect their work. By actively listening to their concerns and addressing any fears they have, leaders can help staff successfully navigate through the transition.

Exposure to potentially traumatic incidents

A **traumatic incident** is an experience that causes physical, emotional, or psychological distress or harm. It is an event that is perceived and experienced as a threat to one's safety or to the stability of one's world.

Many rail staff face exposure to a wide range of potentially traumatic incidents in their roles that can have an adverse effect on their mental health. These include witnessing or being involved with a suicide or injurious attempt on the railway, physical and verbal abuse in the workplace, or being involved in a trespass or welfare concern incident. In 2022, there were 266 suspected suicides reported on the railway. On top of this, there were thousands of lifesaving interventions made, a significant proportion of which were by rail staff.

Many staff spoke about the expectation and pressure they felt in their roles to deal with traumatic incidents as part of their job. This expectation and pressure often discourages staff from seeking support when they need it. We also heard how staff have a constant stream of updates and alerts about traumatic incidents fed to them on their phones. This regular exposure to and awareness of traumatic incidents from secondary sources can invoke vicarious trauma in staff, and can have further detrimental effects on their mental health.

Vicarious trauma

Vicarious or secondary trauma is a form of distress or trauma that is experienced indirectly by hearing details of, or witnessing, the aftermath of a traumatic experience by another person.
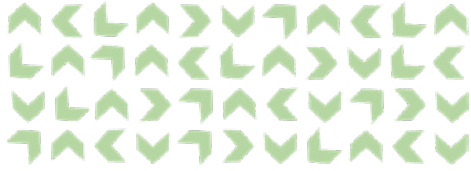
> 66 The railway has a lot of fatalities – dealing with the impact and reading the logs as part of your role can damage your mental health. 99

Covid-19 pandemic

As key workers, rail staff were among those most affected by covid-19 due to greater workloads, greater risk of infection and being at the forefront of the pandemic response. Rail staff had to respond quickly to the significant challenges presented by covid-19, with little preparation and limited resources.

Recent research by the University of Strathclyde found that only half of railway workers believe they were offered timely advice on responding to the covid-19 pandemic. The research also found that a quarter of railway workers had experienced a deterioration in their mental health during the pandemic, and the same percentage felt they had lacked in work-based support during this period[16].

> 66 It was an awful time – going to work throughout the pandemic was tough and then I lost my wife to covid. There was no real help or concern for my welfare from my manager. 99

Financial worries

Many people in the UK are struggling with their financial situation as a result of the covid-19 pandemic and financial worries have increased due to inflation rises, the cost of living going up, and rising mortgage rates. According to a recent report by Wagestream, financial wellbeing is the most common worry among the UK workforce. The report found that 70 per cent of UK employees are now worrying more about money, with 76 per cent of those suffering worse mental health as a result[17]. The Office for National Statistics also reports that the rising cost of living is top of household concerns[18].

We found when speaking to rail staff that financial concerns were a significant worry for many, and that this has been magnified by the loss of pay with the recent rail strikes (which have been occurring regularly since Summer 2022). Rail staff we spoke to reacted positively to financial awareness sessions being included within the health and well-being support provided by their organisation. (Add quote to corroborate).

Leading on from financial worries, a recent survey from the Rail Benevolent Fund found that the biggest concern for rail staff in the next 1-3 years is redundancy, followed by job insecurity[19].

> ❝ There is a lot of financial stress currently – there are staff within some rail organisations visiting food banks. ❞

> **Addressing the financial worries of employees needs to be an important priority within mental wellbeing strategies.**

Nature of work within the industry
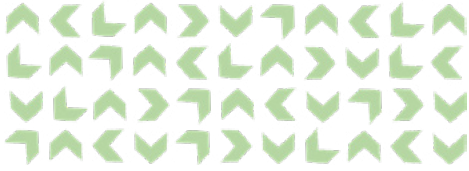
Lone working

Lone workers are those who work physically alone for a number of hours without close or direct supervision and with low levels of contact with other colleagues.

Lone workers make up a large proportion of the rail workforce. Using the definition above, RSSB estimated that between 47 per cent and 79 per cent of passenger and freight operating company workers could be classified as lone workers. This includes train drivers, train guards, signallers, ticket office and platform staff, train managers, engineers and delivery drivers, and many more. The RSSB research also found that there is currently a very limited understanding of the health and wellbeing impact of lone working[20].

In our research, lone working was frequently cited by staff as a factor that negatively impacts on mental wellbeing. Staff described feeling isolated and lonely in these roles and sometimes invisible.

> ❝ If you're having a bad day, you have the whole day alone in your cab to think and dwell on it. You can feel very isolated. ❞
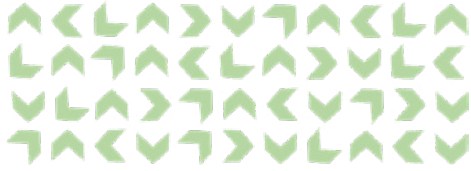
Train Driver

❝ When dispatching, there are often long waits between trains, and this can feel very lonely – there is no one to let off steam to. ❞

❝ There's lots of lone working on stations, lone working dispatchers, large gaps between trains, no regular customers coming through – then suddenly you might have a safety critical task to attend to. ❞

Photo credit: Richa Mitra/Samaritans

Remote working

The practice of an employee working at their home, or in some other place that is not an organisation's usual place of business.

Since the pandemic, more staff in the rail industry work remotely at least part of the time. Research has shown that remote working can have an impact on staff mental health, with many feeling less connected to their colleagues and finding it harder to switch off from work.

Given that lone and remote workers don't have the same day-to-day interactions with colleagues, changes in their behaviour are more likely to go unnoticed. To ensure that employees feel comfortable discussing their struggles and accessing support, it is crucial to raise awareness of mental health among lone workers, as well as their managers and colleagues.

The opportunity for staff to connect with others in similar positions can be vital, especially for lone and remote workers. Organisations should prioritise staff engagement and create opportunities for them to interact with each other.

Useful resource:

Keeping Lone Workers Safe and Secure is a set of tools developed by RSSB to help effectively manage the risks associated with lone working in rail.
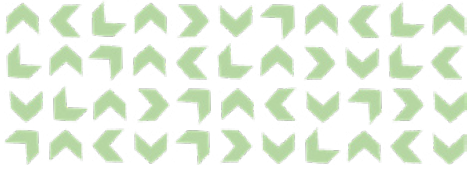
Shift patterns

Many job roles within the rail sector involve complex working patterns and unsociable working hours. Research shows that shift work is associated with considerable impacts on sleep, depressed mood and anxiety, substance use, impairments in cognition, lower quality of life, and even suicidal ideation[21].

❝ In freight, [shift patterns] can have a big impact on staff stress levels, especially for those who have family commitments. The lack of sleep, the lone working... ❞

Working alone or working on shifts can result in limited access to support and colleagues, which can make it challenging to form meaningful connections and relationships. This, in turn, can further exacerbate the initial feelings of isolation and loneliness felt by staff.

It is important to address the social isolation and loneliness of rail staff, as research shows they contribute to an increased risk of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Research by Mental Health UK found those aged 18-24 are twice as likely to feel lonely at work than others, and were more likely to agree this had affected their mental health[22]. Organisations need to encourage social connections amongst staff and provide ways for them to engage in a work community, especially younger staff members.
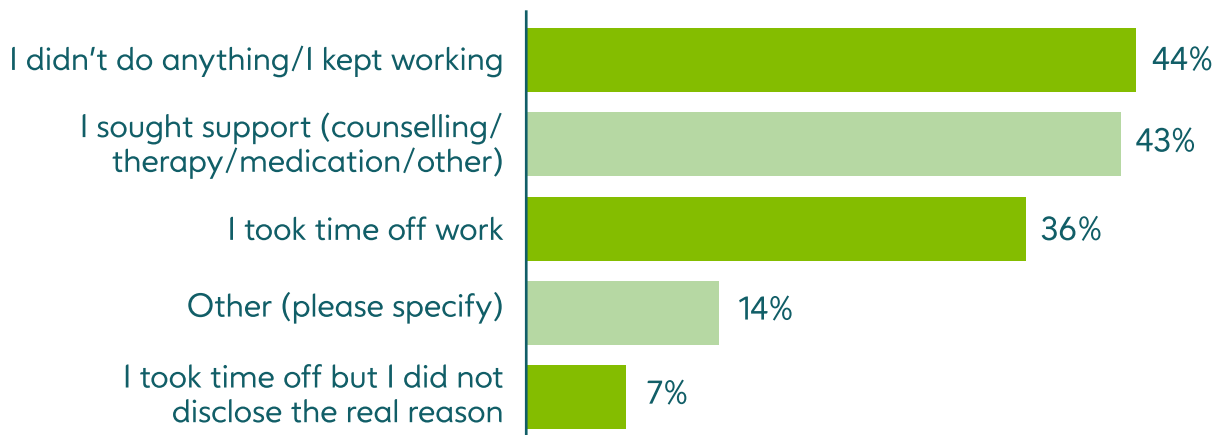
Barriers to seeking support

We asked participants who had experienced a change in their mental health (that impacted their ability to work), what they did as a result:

What did you do as a result of this change in your mental health?

| Response	Percentage
I didn't do anything/I kept working	44%
I sought support (counselling/therapy/medication/other)	43%
I took time off work	36%
Other (please specify)	14%
I took time off but I did not disclose the real reason	7%

Presenteeism

Attending work while ill or not engaged and so underperforming or being less productive.

More than half of staff (57%) carried on working despite the change in their mental health impacting on their ability to carry out their job, and 44 per cent of staff said they didn't seek any support and that they carried on working. We might call this presenteeism – attending work while ill or not engaged and so underperforming or being less productive. A recent (2022) Deloitte study found that presenteeism is the largest contributor to an employer's costs relating to mental health. The report estimated that mental health related presenteeism is around four to four-and-a-half times the cost of mental health related absenteeism.

The report also found that presenteeism is stronger among key workers than non-key workers[23]. It is important to consider how presenteeism risks further compounding staff mental illness and potentially risks the safety of both staff and passengers where staff are in safety critical roles.
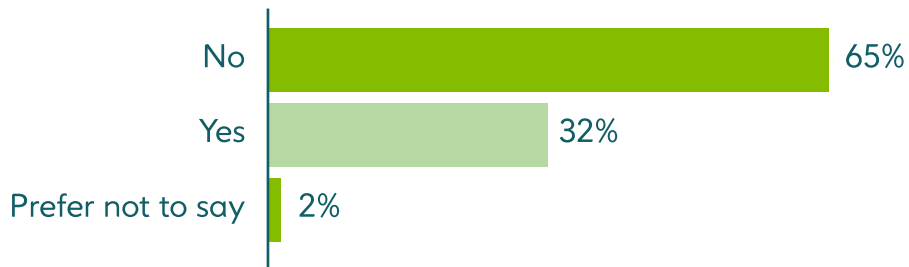
Length of service has a significant impact on the likelihood to carry on working when feeling mentally unwell. Those working for an organisation for less than a year were the most likely to carry on working (80%) and those working for an organisation for 10 years or more were the least likely (37%).

Of those who did seek support, around a third did so through their organisation (32%). This is similar to what is found across the UK workforce as a whole – the most recent Business In the Community (BITC) report on mental health at work found that 30 per cent of those who had experienced mental health problems sought support via work.
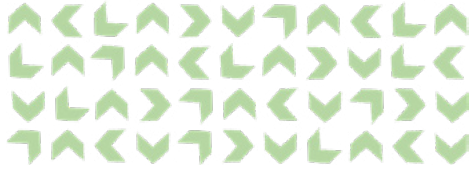
Did you seek help or support for this through your organisation?

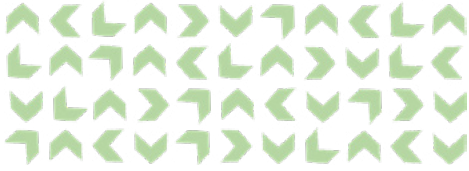|	
No	65%
Yes	32%
Prefer not to say	2%

Again, length of service has an impact on this, with employees of less than five years being less likely to seek help via their organisation.

Organisations should provide targeted support to new starters and those who have been in the industry for less than five years. This group is less likely to proactively seek support for mental health through their organisation, and may instead resort to presenteeism, which can ultimately impact their productivity and well-being.

Did you seek help or support for this through your organisation?
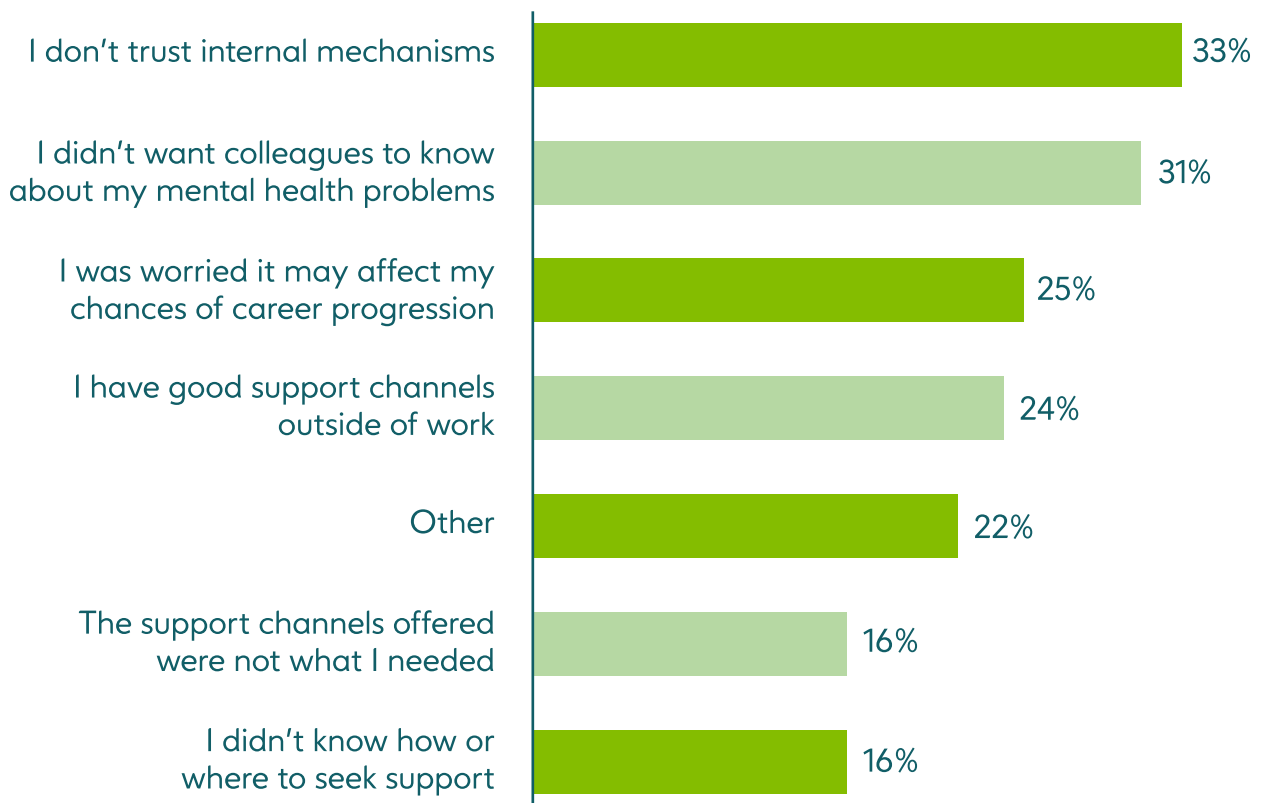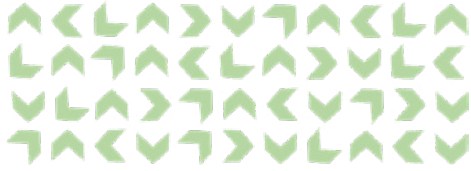(breakdown by length of service)

No		60%
		64%
		74%
Yes		36%
		35%
		24%
Prefer not to say		3%
		1%
		2%
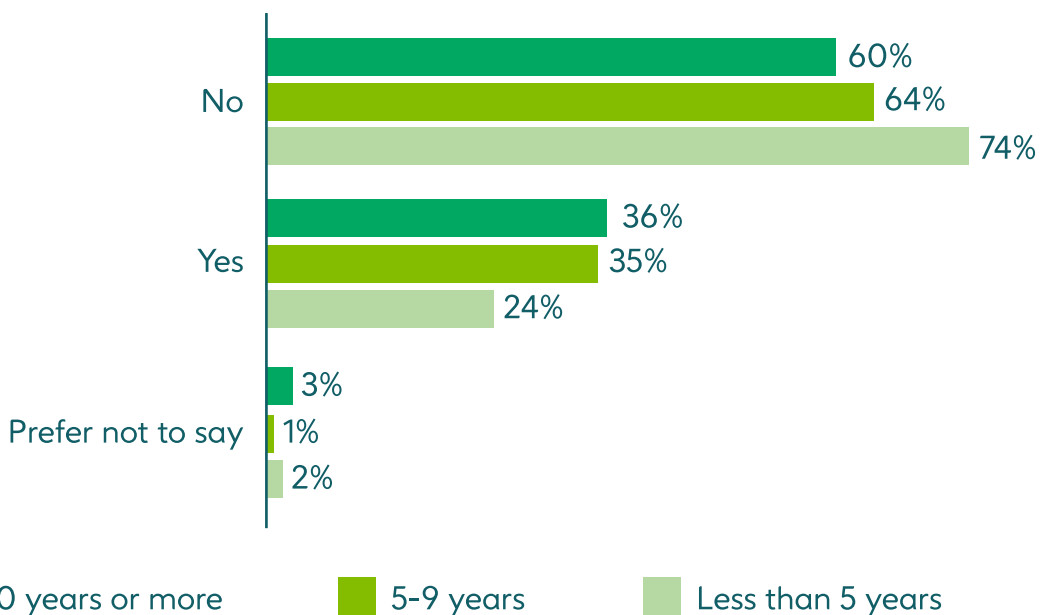
■ 10 years or more   ■ 5-9 years   ■ Less than 5 years

"Actively promoting staff well-being leads to greater staff productivity, morale and retention, and reduced sickness absence and 'presenteeism'[24]." (Mental health in the workplace, CIPD report, 2021)

The most common reasons for someone not seeking help through their organisation were; lack of trust in internal mechanisms (33%), not wanting colleagues to find out about their mental health issues (31%) and worry that it may affect their chances of career progression (25%).

Why did you choose not to seek support through your organisation?

I don't trust internal mechanisms	33%
I didn't want colleagues to know about my mental health problems	31%
I was worried it may affect my chances of career progression	25%
I have good support channels outside of work	24%
Other	22%
The support channels offered were not what I needed	16%
I didn't know how or where to seek support	16%

Almost a quarter of staff (24%) chose not to seek support through work because they have good support available at home or elsewhere. This was notably more likely to be the case for female staff (29%) than it was for male staff (19%). Like stigma, which we will discuss later in the report, this poses the potential to exacerbate the issue of mental health (in relation to help-seeking behaviours), as the rail sector is such a male-dominated industry. This point further highlights the need for mental health support to be readily available.

Mistrust of support on offer

A third of staff said that they chose not to seek support because they did not trust the internal mechanisms of their organisation – the most common barrier cited in our research. This was notably higher for male staff (37% compared to 25% of female staff) and those with intermediate and entry-level job roles.

66 **Many have a distrust of EAP and other services offered – especially as you often need to go through a wellbeing manager or internal occupational health service. There is a concern that it will go down on their record.** 99

66 **I did not feel comfortable in speaking with my employer, through fear it may be used against me. I kept the issue to myself and continue to do so.** 99
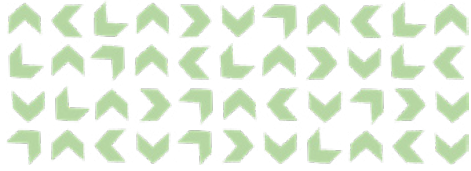
This ties in with the concerns that staff have about their career progression, discussed later, with staff worrying that having mental health issues on their record will in some way hinder their career development or put them at risk of losing their job.

Building trust in the workplace is essential for creating a positive and productive work environment. It can be done by demonstrating consistent and transparent communication, showing empathy and understanding, and following through on commitments. Actively listening to colleagues and being responsive to their needs is also crucial in building trust. By building trust, organisations can create an environment where individuals feel safe and supported leading to increased employee satisfaction, improved teamwork, and better overall performance.

Stigma

Almost a third of respondents (31%) chose not to seek support through their organisation because they didn't want their colleagues to find out about their mental health issues.

This was true for a higher proportion of male staff (36% compared to 26% of female staff), suggesting that the stigma is felt more for men. We will discuss stigma in more detail in the next section.

> It can be harder for men to open up and it's a very male-dominated industry.

> Pride is a big barrier to many – they don't want to admit failure or admit that something is affecting their ability to do their job.

Concerns about effect on career progression

A quarter of participants cited concerns about the effect on their career progression as a reason for not seeking support through their organisation, rising to a third for those aged under 45. This is less likely to be a concern for those who have worked for their organisation for 10 years or more (14%).

When exploring this further in focus group discussions, staff expressed worry that opening up about their mental health would lead managers to conclude that they are not capable of progressing in their role and that they would view needing support as a weakness and a sign that they are unable to cope.
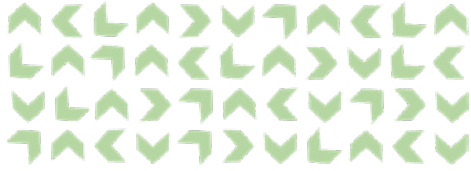
This shows the importance of organisations encouraging role modelling from staff who feel more mentally stable and capable after seeking mental health support. It also highlights the need for managers to reassure staff of the confidentiality of seeking support.

> Managers need to reassure staff about the confidentiality of conversations and that speaking up won't affect their job role and progression.

> There needs to be flexibility for train drivers to move into different roles within the sector if their circumstances change. There are no opportunities for drivers who are going through a rough patch, yet they have so much experience and skills to offer the industry.

> **Many of these barriers to seeking support emphasise the need for organisations to reassure staff that they can access support confidentially without their employer knowing.**

Lack of awareness and understanding of support available

Sixteen per cent of staff said they did not seek support because they did not know how or where to access it. This lack of awareness and understanding seems to be more prominent for frontline staff, especially lone workers.

❝ Support needs to be more accessible and visible. ❞

❝ It can be a difficult and lengthy process to get support – having to go through your manager and fill out forms. Support needs to be easier to access. ❞

❝ Often there is more available than staff realise – support is not documented or communicated effectively. ❞
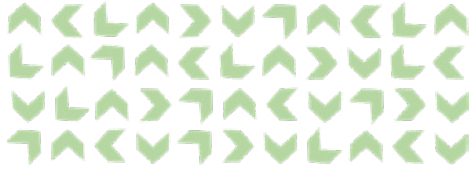
Worry about letting others down

For many staff, there is a worry that by seeking support for their mental health and potentially taking time off work, they will be letting both their colleagues and rail passengers down. This is especially apparent with the current staff shortages and heavy workloads reported by many staff. Lone workers in particular are likely to have this concern as they often have sole responsibility for completing their tasks and ensuring the safety of themselves and others. This responsibility can create a sense of duty and obligation that makes it difficult for them to prioritise their own wellbeing.

We also heard staff talk about the great sense of pride and responsibility they felt in their job, and how it is a barrier to reaching out for help.

❝ There is a pressure to carry on working, even if you're struggling. To admit you're struggling feels like you're letting people down. ❞

❝ You worry about letting team members down. There's often no one else to fulfill the job... you usually just struggle along. ❞

❝ There is immense guilt with taking time off... and letting others down can make you feel much worse mentally. ❞

❝ [Staff] worry that by not turning up for work they will ruin people's lives – passengers, not just colleagues. ❞

This is another factor that can lead to presenteeism, as discussed earlier, which has significant associated costs and risks.
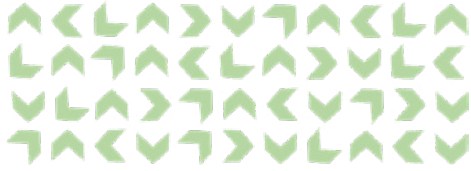
Nature of roles within the sector

As well as lone working, heavy workloads, and shift patterns being a driver of mental health issues within the sector, they can also be a barrier for staff to seeking support. Staff described how lone working and shift working prohibited them from accessing many support options – because they were not visible to them or available to them during their working hours. This included MHFAs, Wellbeing Champions, and support that was mostly accessed online (such as webinars and staff forums). Lone workers expressed how they did not have the opportunity to talk to their colleagues or line managers for any length of time, making it more difficult for them to open up to them about any mental health issues they may have. We also heard how signposting to support services was not visible to staff working in isolation, and how they often missed communications about mental health support and wellbeing.

❝ Many frontline staff don't have anyone at work to talk to for most of the day – train drivers, signaling staff. They can't go to the mess room and speak to a friendly colleague like others can. ❞

❝ For conductors it's difficult for them to take five minutes out for an informal chat with a colleague or manager as they need to get on the train. ❞

❝ They do have online stuff but with the shifts I work the last thing I want to do is go home and log onto my work phone. ❞

❝ My Employer does give access to online training, but it is voluntary, and no time is given during my working day to complete the training. ❞

Fear of being taken off the job

We heard from many staff who were worried that seeking support for their mental health would result in them being taken off the job. This was acutely felt amongst those in safety-critical roles such as train drivers and signalers. Staff felt that being taken off the job would be further detrimental to their mental health, and many were concerned that they wouldn't have a job to come back to. Fear of being removed from their role was also connected to the barrier of letting others down, worrying that one less person would mean more work for their colleagues.

❝ As a driver, I didn't want anything to risk my position. ❞

❝ If you take time off work there's a worry about what will happen when you return, whether you'll be redeployed. ❞

❝ There's a definite fear of being taken off the job if you talk about mental health issues. ❞
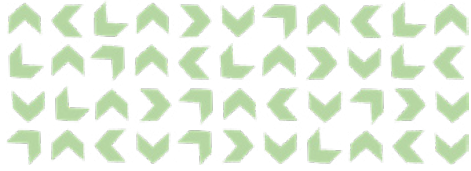
Impact of line managers

Many staff expressed that line managers were a barrier to seeking support for mental health if the relationship was not a positive one, especially for those who felt that their manager was part of the problem or the cause of their concerns.

❝ There needs to be direct access to support rather than having to go through your manager – going through them can be a barrier. ❞

We will discuss the role of the manager in more detail later in this report.

Support channels were not what staff needed

Sixteen per cent of staff did not seek support through their organisation because they felt that the support channels on offer to them were not suitable or appropriate for their needs. It is crucial for organisations to have a range of support options available to cater to the diverse needs and experiences of all staff.

Mental health stigma

Mental health stigma is the set of negative attitudes, pre-judgements and behaviours that can make it harder for individuals with mental health problems to live a normal life. Stigma can occur both externally and internally (self-stigma)[25].

In the workplace, mental health stigma might manifest as discrimination, lack of support, negative attitudes, fear of disclosure, and reduced productivity among employees with mental health conditions. Stigma can cause shame, isolation, fear, and reluctance to seek help, which can worsen mental health problems and reduce quality of life.

One of the key reasons for rail staff choosing not to seek support through their organisation is the stigma that still exists around mental health within many parts of the rail industry. There is recognition from staff that there have been improvements over the last few years, however, they feel that stigma still exists in many areas and to differing degrees.

66 Only very recently I can recall managers getting angry and swearing when staff have called in sick due to mental illness and disbelieving staff. 99
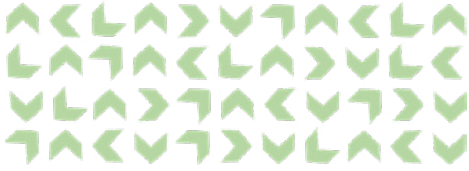
66 My line manager told me I had two choice - sit at home crying about it or get on with it! 99

66 My manager literally made fun of me in front of other colleagues and implied mental health issues are basically not serious or real. 99

Psychological safety

Psychological safety is a term used to describe a particular team dynamic. It is a shared belief within a team that it is safe to take risks and to be your true self at work, without fear that this will lead to negative personal or professional consequences.

Almost a quarter of rail staff (23%) said they had reported being physically sick to their manager, when in fact it was connected to their mental health.

Have you ever reported being physically sick to your manager when it was really connected to your mental health?

No	71%
Yes	23%
Prefer not to say	6%
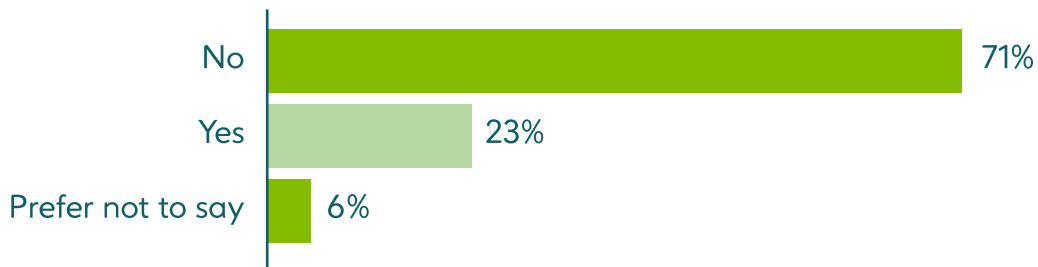
> It's easier to say you are physically unwell than it is to say you're suffering with poor mental health. It feels like you need to have a reason to have mental health problems, like a bereavement.

> Stigma is still very much there. Many staff are scared to mention mental health and so they try to help themselves but not always in the best way.
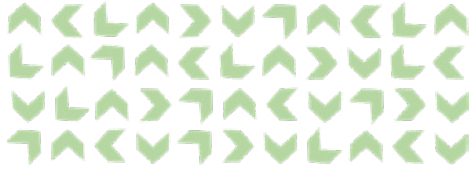
> When you call in sick you have to choose a reason from a set list and the list only shows physical symptoms, so you are almost forced to choose a physical symptom.

As highlighted by the quotes above, there still seems to be a lack of awareness and understanding around mental health within the sector. This, in turn, is likely to increase stigma amongst staff in the organisations involved.

A male-dominated industry

Data provided by the National Skills Academy for Rail (NSAR) shows that 85 per cent of staff working in the UK rail sector are male[26]. International studies of male-dominated industries suggest that masculine norms predict poor mental health outcomes, low help-seeking intentions, and higher rates of suicide[27].

Almost a third (30%) of respondents in our survey had chosen not to seek support through their organisation because they didn't want their colleagues to find out about their mental health issues. This was the case for a higher proportion of male staff (36% compared to 26% of female staff). This aligns with findings from the recent Business In the Community (BITC) report, which found that men are more likely to keep work-related mental health problems to themselves (35% of men vs 26% of women)[28].

Research suggests that higher levels of stigma amongst male employees is seen in other male-dominated industries, such as construction and the military, and it can potentially exacerbate stigma further[29]. When speaking to staff in focus group discussions, there was a feeling amongst many that it is deemed more acceptable for women to talk about their mental health than it is for men.

66 Men tend to talk much less about how they feel than women do, they find it hard to talk through mental health issues. **99**

Peer to peer support groups aimed specifically at men, such as Andy's Man Club, are likely to be a great source of support for male staff and a positive step forward in breaking down mental health stigma. We heard from male staff in our research who said they found Andy's Man Club sessions to be very beneficial to their mental health and wellbeing.

Andy's Man Club

Andy's Man Club is a men's suicide prevention charity that offers free-to-attend peer-to-peer support groups across the United Kingdom and online. Their aim is to end the stigma surrounding men's mental health and to help men through the power of conversation.
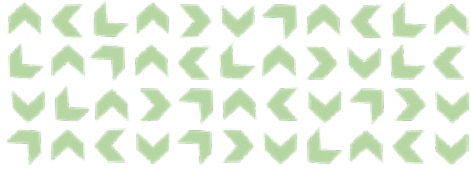
andysmanclub.co.uk

The Book of Man

The Book of Man is a support network that provides advice and inspiration to modern men in a time of great change. They aim to open up possibilities by questioning masculinity, creating debate around the issues men face, and exploring new, progressive ways to live. The network boasts a team of experienced writers and experts who offer practical guidance on navigating modern life and highlight new role models who inspire men to live more fulfilling and authentic lives.

The Book of Man

Research has found that women employed in traditionally male-dominated occupations have higher rates of suicide than other employed women. This suggests that the gender composition of the workplace can have a significant impact on the mental health of its employees. The main risk factors identified by research are poor health and lifestyles, unsupportive workplace relationships, job overload, and job demands[30].

Different working environments and sub-cultures

Staff spoke about the language that is used around mental health within their organisations and how this often exacerbates and contributes to the stigma. They expressed how in many areas there is a lot of 'banter' and mocking from colleagues when staff talk about their feelings, and about mental health in general. There was suggestion from some that the stigma around mental health is stronger amongst frontline staff than it is for staff who are office-based, and that the culture is notably different. There is a higher proportion of male staff working in frontline roles; this may go some way to explaining why the stigma is stronger in that section of the industry. It is commonly observed that many frontline staff have been in their roles for long periods of time, which may limit the potential for changes to filter through.

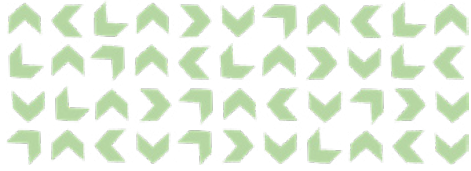66 I've worked both on the frontline and office-based and I can see the difference in the culture. On the frontline the culture is often to make a joke about mental health, but in the office there is much more acceptance and awareness. 99

66 The stigma is still very strong within freight – there is a culture of bullying, intimidation and blame. There is no understanding of or compassion for mental health issues. When things go wrong at work the first instinct of managers is to look for someone to blame. 99

Staff suggested that because of the stigma, available private space was needed so that staff could speak to their manager, an MHFA or other colleagues about their mental health concerns. This might encourage staff to open up and seek support without the worry of others overhearing.

Organisations can help to reduce stigma by using, and encouraging staff to use, respectful and accurate language around mental health, avoiding use of stereotypes and labels, and showing empathy and compassion for those struggling with their mental health. This in turn helps create a supportive environment where staff can feel comfortable sharing experiences and opening up about mental health.

Role of managers

Over a third (35%) of staff within the sector turn to their manager when they notice a change in their mental health and want to seek support. This is notably higher than what is observed across the UK workforce as a whole. The recent BITC report found that just 14 per cent of those who had experienced work-related poor mental health spoke to their line manager[31]. This is positive for the sector and suggests that, in some areas, they are on the right track in building good managerial relations with staff.
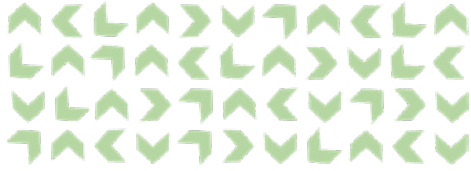
Indeed, we heard some great examples of how managers within the sector are going above and beyond to support their staff with their mental health. It is important that senior leaders empower those who are doing great things in this area and provide them with continuous support.

❝ Without my manager's support I would never have known I could access the EAP scheme or self-refer to my local NHS trust. He helped me to recognise that the problem was much bigger than I thought and that I needed time away from work to deal with it. Without him and the support he helped me get I would not be where I am today. Sadly, he is the exception to the rule and most managers don't care. I am incredibly lucky he is my manager! ❞

❝ My line manager was so supportive and non-judgmental. They had also been through a similar experience to me. ❞

❝ My manager was empathetic, supportive, and willing to meet me part way in agreeing reasonable adjustments to my working pattern. ❞

Recent global research by UKG found that managers have as much of an impact on people's mental health as their spouse, at 69 per cent[32]. This was certainly echoed by staff we spoke to in our research, particularly as many have a deep rooted and historical link to the industry, through both long tenure and family connections almost seeing their colleagues as their 'railway family'.

Pressure on managers

Our research highlighted that managers unfortunately do not always have the time available to talk at length with staff, especially those with many direct reports. Many managers are already under a lot of pressure in their roles, which has been amplified by heavy workloads and recent staff shortages. There was recognition from staff across all levels that with pressure on managers, the responsibility of mental health support should not just be on their shoulders. It would be beneficial for all staff to undertake mental health awareness training and staff should be encouraged to support one another. There was also agreement that managers need the support from senior leaders, who must spearhead this change.

66 There can be a lot of pressure on those managers who are compassionate and make themselves approachable – it may be overwhelming for them. **99**

66 Managers need to be given the time to support staff and speak to them individually. Currently they are under too much pressure. **99**

The manager's skills and training

We understand from our research that managers are not always given the adequate training and tools to support staff with their mental health and wellbeing, and in some cases they are not given any training at all. Many workers felt their managers did not know how to provide support, whereas managers explained that they did not feel confident providing it, despite wanting to help. It has been observed that managers are frequently given wellbeing policies without adequate guidance or training on how to put them into action. As a result, employees may not receive the necessary support, and managers may feel unsure about how to support their staff. This is not unusual as the most recent BITC report on mental health at work found that the main perceived barrier for managers helping employees with mental health issues was that they had not had any training on mental health.

Although managers across the sector have great technical skills and experience, there was concern that some managers do not have the appropriate people skills needed to support staff, particularly with their mental health. Staff agreed that these skills – which include communication, motivation, listening, empathy and compassion – are an essential part of a manager's job profile.

66 Many managers simply aren't trained to deal with people – it's all about performance and trains running on time. **99**
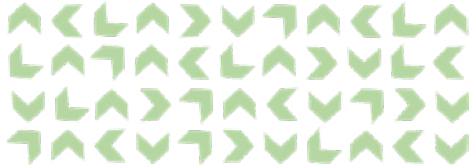
❝ Training for managers needs to be more in-depth, not just an e-learning video to do in their own time. ❞

❝ Managers sometimes don't know how to start the discussion – this is essential training. ❞

❝ Managers are not being trained on mental health and wellbeing, there's a lack of knowledge and empathy towards people who are suffering from it – I was told to 'google' coping mechanisms. ❞

❝ Managers need more than online training videos – I've seen some putting them up on the screen but turning the volume down! ❞

The World Health Organisation (WHO) says it is vital that line managers build solid relationships with their staff as it may be the crucial factor in spotting underlying mental health issues[33]. Therefore, training line managers with the right skills to notice and act on changes in their staff is key to providing the proper support to their teams.

WHO recommends that managers should be trained to:

- Recognise and respond to staff experiencing emotional distress.

- Build interpersonal skills like open communication and active listening.

- Cultivate better understanding of how job stressors affect mental health and how they can be managed.

Well-constructed and delivered training can help to take the pressure off managers by identifying clear boundaries and confirming that their role is not to diagnose, advise or fix.

Useful resources

WHO guidelines on mental health at work provides recommendations for training managers.

RSSB: Research on Mental Health Training for Line Managers provides detail around the conditions for effective mental health training for line managers.

It can be hard for managers to spot changes in people if they do not regularly see staff. This is common in the rail sector, especially with frontline staff and those who work remotely. In these cases, it is especially important for managers to regularly ask staff how they're doing.

Staff expressed how important it is for managers to be authentic advocates of mental health and to role model healthy practices in this area – both in terms of their own mental health and that of those they manage.
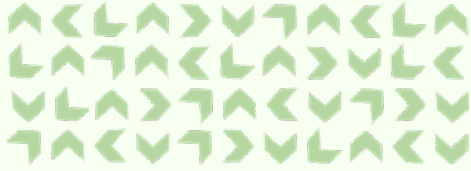
Case study: Anglian Water

Building a programme for a diverse, field-based organisation

Anglian Water have been at the forefront of workplace mental health for many years, with both the Board and the Chief Executive leading from the top in raising the topic for both discussion and action. Anglian Water has a fundamental belief that looking after its people is the right thing to do, but it also makes good business sense. From a business point of view, they recognise that if their employees are fit, well and safe they are likely to be more productive and deliver a better service to customers.

Anglian Water is a water company operating in the East of England across multiple sites, employing over 5,000 people, 65 per cent of whom are male. Their long-term wellbeing strategy focuses on its employees being 'happier, healthier, safer'. The strategy puts health and wellbeing centre stage – a commitment that extends beyond its workforce to those it does not directly employ, such as contractors in its supply chain. Their best practice approach has been widely recognised and they were named Employer of the Year at the 2020 Utility Week Awards.
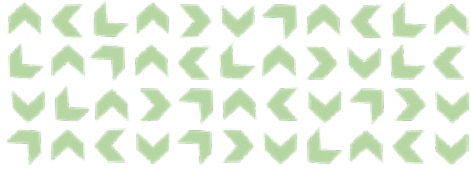
In 2018 the company identified the need to increase the confidence of frontline managers in both understanding mental health and in equipping them with the skills to have open conversations. They partnered with Mental Health at Work to develop and deliver a customised programme that reflected the specific challenges in the business. Anglian knew that to have impact, any programme delivered needed to be relatable to their diverse working environments: lone-workers, people on shift, tanker drivers and people in office-based roles, including Occupational Health.

Since 2018, over 900 Managers and Well Being Ambassadors have been through a tailored face to face or virtual full day management workshop. Piloting the programme ensured that the specific needs of each target audience could be met, and content has continued to evolve in response to the changing workplace and external environments.

Anglian Water has several employees who are lone workers who are consequently at risk of being isolated. To address their needs, Mental Health at Work ran short, tailored Understand Mental Health sessions, where employees could come together at hotel locations and benefit from some time away from their day-to-day role to consider their mental health and wider well-being. They also signposted to the wide number of resources in place at Anglian if anyone needed further information or help, reaching 1,200 front line staff over 6 dates.

The reach of the programme has continued to evolve, specifically for HGV/RES drivers, who require customised content for these high-risk roles.

The sustainable commitment that Anglian shows to mental health is unquestionable. They have found ways to deliver a core vision for workplace mental health in different ways, with adapted content to ensure accessibility for all their roles.

Trauma

As discussed earlier in this report, many rail staff face exposure to a wide range of potentially traumatic incidents in their roles, which can affect their mental health.

This includes, but is not limited to:

- Fatalities on the railway.
- Accidents at level crossings.
- Witnessing or being involved with a suicide or injurious attempt.
- Physical and verbal abuse in the workplace.
- Being involved in a trespass or welfare concern incident.

In addition to these experiences, which have unfortunately become commonplace for frontline staff in the industry, staff also highlighted the following as scenarios they consider to be traumatic in the workplace:

- Service disruption.
- Being involved in a grievance or complaint.
- Bullying and harassment.
- Heavy workloads and understaffing.

❝ Pressure of having to perform more than one role whilst being the only person on duty. ❞

❝ Being under resourced but still expected to deliver. ❞

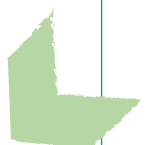❝ Having a mental health issue that people don't understand can be traumatic. ❞

❝ As frontline staff, service disruption can be traumatic because of the stress of the situation – the reaction from the public and the worry that you might lash out at passengers. ❞
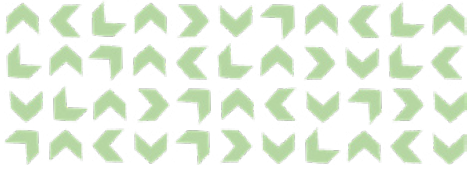
Almost two thirds (61%) of rail staff have experienced verbal abuse whilst working for their current employer, and almost a fifth (19%) have experienced physical abuse. This is notably higher for staff working on the frontline.

The level of abuse and threatening behaviour experienced by rail staff can be severe and we heard numerous examples of this in our research such as being spat on, being pulled by the hair and even receiving threats of arson against themselves and their office.

Useful resources

Work-Related Violence Involving Members of the Public research commissioned by RSSB outlines intervention to effectively manage the issue of customer on staff violence.
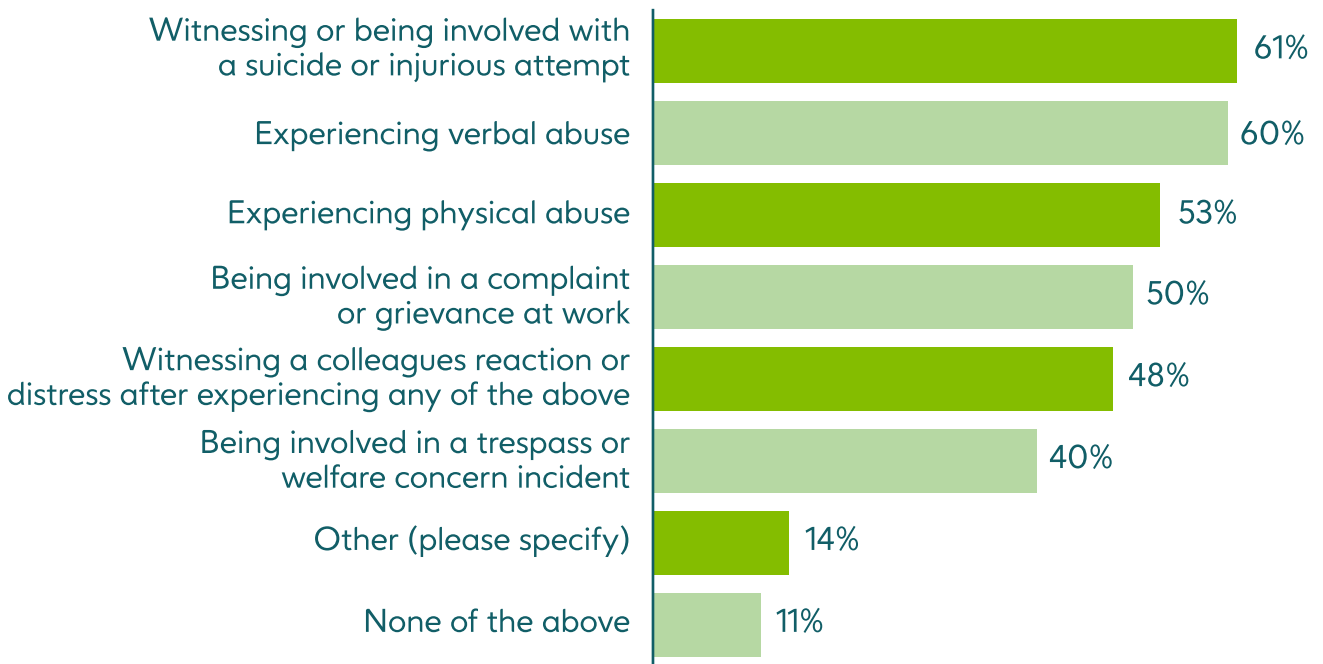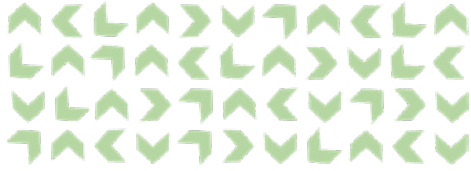
Have you experienced any of the following while working for your current employer?

Verbal abuse (from commuters/ general public/colleague etc.)	61%
Witnessing a colleagues reaction or distress after experiencing any of the above	48%
Being involved in a complaint or grievance at work	43%
Being involved in a trespass or welfare concern incident	39%
Witnessing or being involved with a suicide or injurious attempt	33%
None of the above	21%
Physical abuse (from commuters/ general public/colleague etc.)	19%
Other (please specify)	6%

Which of the following would you classify as trauma in a professional setting?

Witnessing or being involved with a suicide or injurious attempt	61%
Experiencing verbal abuse	60%
Experiencing physical abuse	53%
Being involved in a complaint or grievance at work	50%
Witnessing a colleagues reaction or distress after experiencing any of the above	48%
Being involved in a trespass or welfare concern incident	40%
Other (please specify)	14%
None of the above	11%

Experiencing trauma can have serious, long term negative effects. It can make people more vulnerable to developing mental health issues and can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some people who experience trauma will turn to alcohol, drugs, or self-harm to help them cope with difficult memories and emotions. Research shows trauma can also increase the risk of developing physical health problems, including long-term illnesses[34].

Several staff expressed that they had been exposed to multiple traumatic incidents in their role and the cumulative nature of such events can have a significant impact on mental well-being. We heard from one controller who had witnessed seven traumatic incidents in the space of just ten days.

Recent RSSB research found that 10 per cent of rail staff reported symptoms consistent with a clinical post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD), over double the rate found in the general population. This higher rate of C-PTSD is indicative of the impact of repeated exposure to traumatic events, characteristic of trauma-exposed work[35].

Different types of trauma

The word trauma is commonly associated with harrowing events, such as physical or sexual abuse, natural disasters, war, serious injury or death. These events are usually connected with vulnerability to PTSD. However, there are also "little t" traumas, which are less severe but still highly distressing events that can have a significant impact on an individual's psychological well-being. Examples of "little t" traumas in the workplace that we heard in our research included bullying, harassment, discrimination, service disruption and being involved in a grievance or complaint.

The impact of "little t" traumas can accumulate over time and may lead to long-term negative effects on an individual's mental health and well-being. However, due to the misconception that these events are minor or insignificant, "little t" traumas may be overlooked, dismissed, or minimised by others, which can make it harder for individuals to seek help and support.
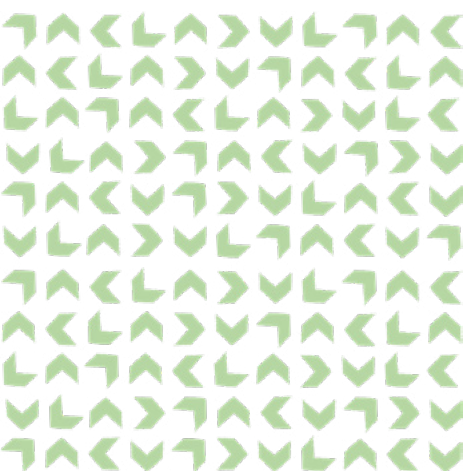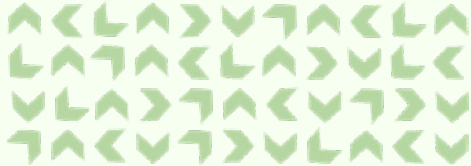
Head-shunt - a personal railway journey leading to a rail mental health charity

Paul Stanford, a former railway worker with 37 years of experience on the frontline, and his wife Fiona, are on a mission to tackle the mental health challenges faced by UK railway staff. Having personally experienced post-traumatic stress disorder after attending train crashes and rail suicides, Paul understands the importance of addressing mental health in the industry. Together, they established Head-shunt, a charity that educates people and guides those in need towards support.

Working in the railway industry involves unique challenges, including working alone, at night, and during unsocial times of the year. The pandemic has placed immense pressure on industries, and the challenges faced by rail staff can often be overlooked. Paul and Fiona believe that railway staff tend to focus on keeping things going, often neglecting their own well-being.

Paul's journey to help others began with him giving talks on his mental health experience, now to over 2500 people across the rail industry. Fiona has also undertaken voluntary work in the charity sector and acted as a chair of charities for one of her employers.

Their vision is to raise mental health awareness and understanding in the UK rail industry through education based

on lived experience. They hope to help rail staff understand how, when, and where to get support, promote a culture of positive well-being, and break the stigma of mental health in the industry.

The name "Head-shunt" is a well-known railway term that is crucial to the functioning of a rail yard or depot. Their human analogy is a healthy head that enables a person to be well. With their passion and commitment, Paul and Fiona are shining a light on the realities of working in the industry and are making a positive impact on the mental health of UK railway staff.

head-shunt.com
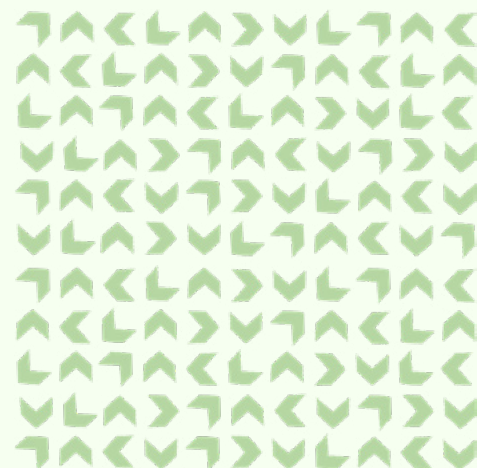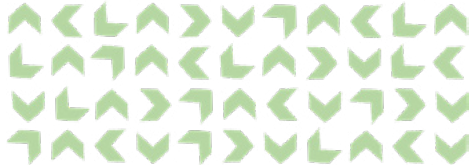
Support for staff experiencing trauma

Some staff felt that traumatic incidents were not always dealt with in the best way, and that there was a lack of concern for staff welfare or consideration of how events might affect staff wellbeing and mental health. There was a perception among some staff that organisations were more concerned with holding staff accountable for incidents rather than prioritising their welfare.

❝ In some organisations there is a culture of blame – as soon as something goes wrong or there is an incident, managers are looking for someone to blame instead of thinking about the welfare of staff. ❞

We heard of cases in some organisations where staff are only offered post-trauma support if they have experienced a specific number of traumatic incidents. Staff must be able to access the right treatment and support when they need it, no matter how many traumatic experiences they have had. Support must be clearly communicated with staff and easily accessible. The way in which organisations support the wellbeing of staff following traumatic incidents can have a huge impact on their ability to recover.

A single, traumatic incident can create a ripple effect, impacting multiple staff in different roles. Staff felt that often support was provided for those directly involved in such incidents, but the same level of support was not provided for those indirectly affected such as signalers, controllers and station staff. All staff impacted by traumatic incidents, whether directly or indirectly, should be given access to appropriate support.

It is crucial for organisations to acknowledge and address all trauma in the workplace including "little t" traumas. Doing so can help staff process and cope with their experiences, reduce their distress, and prevent long-term negative consequences.

Organisations must fully inform prospective employees of the nature of their role and the risks associated with it, without being alarmist. Being prepared for a traumatic event as a job-related risk may help to lessen the impact.

There are some great examples of rail organisations offering comprehensive support and resources for staff following potentially traumatic incidents. One example is Southeastern's development of a voluntary, confidential, peer-to-peer trauma support system. The system comprises a community of ten trained practitioners to offer immediate intervention if a traumatic incident occurs and a TRiM Handbook which outlines the coping strategies and assistance that is available to staff.

RSSB has developed a comprehensive set of guidelines that offer clear advice to the sector on how to respond to potentially traumatic incidents. There needs to be increased awareness of these guidelines and all rail organisations should follow the recommendations provided by RSSB and use them to inform policies and support systems. RSSB: Responding to potentially traumatic incidents

TRiM

TRiM or Trauma Risk Management is a peer delivered risk assessment and ongoing support system, designed specifically to help in the management of traumatic events.
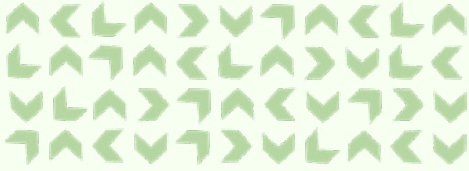
Samaritans Trauma Support Training

After the successful implementation of the Managing Suicidal Contacts course among rail organisations in 2010, the Suicide Prevention Group chaired by Network Rail recognised the need for trauma training for drivers and other frontline staff who were involved in fatalities on the railways. To address this need, Network Rail and Samaritans collaborated, with input from train drivers' union ASLEF, to develop the Trauma Support Training.

To ensure that the training met the needs of rail staff who had experienced a fatality, interviews were conducted with them. Drawing from the real-life experiences of these staff members, a case study was developed and anonymised (with their consent), which served as the foundation for the training.

TRiM resources were evaluated to ensure alignment with the training, and pilot sessions were delivered to senior TRiM practitioners within the British Transport Police (BTP), who fully endorsed the course.
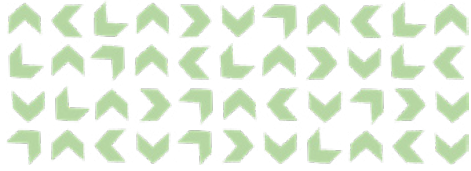
The training content was reviewed and endorsed by both Network Rail and RSSB trauma standards, and aligned with the NICE guidance for PTSD.

To date, nearly 5,000 rail personnel and BTP officers have been trained, with 94% of delegates reporting that it has increased their self-confidence in dealing with potentially traumatic situations. Some of the delegates have gone on to become Samaritan volunteers and/or trauma champions.

Samaritans Trauma Support Training

Chris O'Donovan Photography/Samaritans

Cost of grievance

The volume of complaints and grievances seen within the rail sector is notably high, with 43 per cent of staff in our survey indicating that they have been involved in one at their current workplace. These procedures can be extremely difficult – half of staff considered being involved in a complaint or grievance to be traumatic.
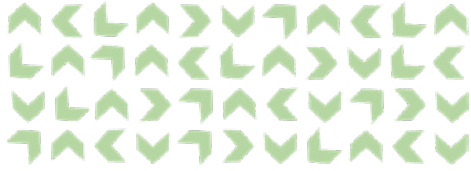
We heard from numerous staff across the sector who had been through a difficult grievance procedure within their organisation, or who were aware of colleagues that had. These staff described how the experience had adversely affected their mental health, and in many cases had resulted in long periods of absence from work. Staff felt the procedures were poorly managed, were often extensively long and drawn out, and that communication throughout the process was poor.

66 Following a stroke...I was involved in a very stressful grievance process lasting almost 3 years and culminating in 3 Employment Tribunals being submitted by me. Some of my internal grievances were upheld and colleagues found guilty of making discriminatory comments about me. As a result, I was absent with stress for 7 months, and ultimately diagnosed with depression. The impact of which has severely impacted my mental health and confidence, self-esteem and completely isolated me from my colleagues. 99

66 Being involved in an operational incident, my fault, and being left at home suspended on investigation with no information being given to me, sitting, stewing in my own thoughts and self-deprecating for over 5 months (others have been left longer). Zero concern for mental health, zero for the punitive feeling of being left out in the cold as it were for significant period of time. 99

An organisation's handling of employee grievances can have a significant impact on overall productivity at work, as was highlighted by staff in our research. Unresolved or prolonged workplace conflict can lead to frustration and dissatisfaction, impact on team morale, create inefficiency and increase absenteeism among employees.

Staff felt that internal grievance and complaints procedures tended to be reactive rather than proactive. Therefore, organisations should consider how they can intervene early before situations escalate. This might include supporting managers to be aware of and look out for signs that staff are struggling and to

actively listen to staff and ensure that they feel valued. Encouraging staff to handle problems in an informal manner as soon as they arise can be a useful approach in many situations and can often be quicker and more efficient than a bureaucratic process. This is especially the case for minor issues that do not require formal documentation or extensive deliberation.

There appears to be considerable fear from some staff around following procedures and worry that mistakes will be made – with negative consequences. This highlights the need for those responsible for using and operating disciplinary procedures, including managers at all levels, to be appropriately trained and thus feel confident in the task.

There is a sense from staff that grievance and complaints procedures are often founded in physical safety mitigation and response and are not inclusive of mental health. Organisations should review these procedures and consider how effective they are through a new perspective.

A new approach to grievance procedures

Leading expert in conflict resolution, David Liddle, proposes that organisations embrace a new approach to managing conflict in the workplace. He suggests rewriting grievance procedures as a "resolution policy," with the focus being on resolving the issues rather than on the grievance and delivering a right or wrong outcome[36].

In a grievance policy, the focus is often on addressing an individual's specific complaint or problem through a formal investigation and disciplinary process which can be lengthy and may not always lead to a satisfactory outcome for all those involved.

On the other hand, a resolution policy seeks to resolve the underlying issues that may have led to a complaint or conflict in the first place. This approach places an emphasis on mediation, collaboration, and communication to find mutually agreeable solutions that benefit everyone involved.

The benefits of a resolution policy over a grievance policy include reduced stress and conflict for individuals involved, faster resolution of issues, improved communication and relationships, and a more positive workplace overall.
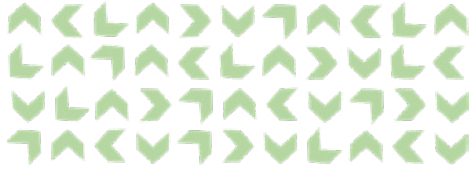
❝ The resolution policy promotes and encourages positive relationships and constructive dialogue. It's about leaders and managers walking the talk. ❞

(David Liddle, CEO and Chief Consultant at The TCM Group).

David Liddle created the Resolution Framework™ in 2019 to help organisations move away from traditional, adversarial approaches of managing workplace conflicts and performance issues, and toward a more collaborative and positive approach. The framework outlines a step-by-step guide that rail organisations can follow to implement the new approach: Stepping-Stones-to-Resolution

The framework has been widely adopted by organisations across the UK, including NHS trusts, Hampshire Constabulary, banks and local authorities.

Comprehensive advice and guidance on dealing with disciplinary and grievance situations is also contained in Discipline and grievances at work: the Acas guide.

Disparity in support offered

The disparity in support offered for mental health and wellbeing across the sector was a prominent theme that emerged from both survey responses and focus group discussions with staff. There also appears to be conflicting messaging and communication around mental health from different rail organisations, which was a cause for concern among staff.

Our research highlighted that some organisations may be lagging behind – in terms of the support available for mental health and wellbeing – compared with other parts of the industry. This certainly appeared to be the case for freight companies, as well as some smaller organisations who do not have the same level of resource and funding as larger organisations. Additionally, it was highlighted that contingent workers did not have the same access to support options as permanent employees (something that was raised as a cause for concern in recent research with the construction industry)[37].
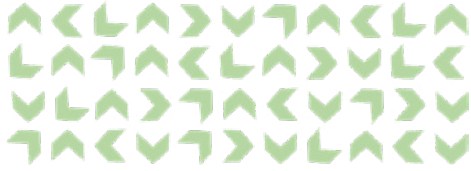
Staff emphasised the need for a railway mandate for senior leadership teams from different organisations across the sector, allowing them to work together in breaking down the silos in the industry. The Railway Mental Health Charter is a great step forward in addressing this, as it brings a cross-industry approach to mental health and encourages organisations to share good practice and resources.

66 There's an inequality regarding what is available and to who. 99

66 How serious mental health is taken depends on which route or TOC you're in. There needs to be a national picture on this. 99

66 The messages and comms around mental health from different TOCs just don't marry up. 99

66 Senior leadership teams from different organisations across the sector need to work together. There needs to be a railway mandate across the board. 99

> ❝ The rail industry is fragmented – we need to break down the silos and talk to each other more. ❞

Staff expressed the desire for parity between physical and mental health, consistency across different roles, areas, and organisations, and for support such as Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) to be consistent and quality assured across the sector. These sentiments underscore the need for the industry to work towards providing equitable and comprehensive support to all employees regardless of their role or job level.

Large organisations must drive mental health support through supply chains which may not have the resources or expertise to offer the same level of support. It is also important to raise awareness of sector-wide support and resources such as the Railway Benefit Fund (RBF) and Railway Mission as these are available to staff in all rail organisations.

Railway Benefit Fund

The Railway Benefit Fund (RBF) is a UK-based charity that provides financial and practical support to current and former railway workers and their families who are experiencing financial hardship or other difficulties. The organisation is funded through donations and support from the rail industry. The RBF offers a range of services, including emergency financial grants, debt advice, mental health support, and respite breaks.
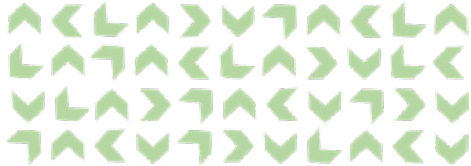
Railway Benefit Fund

Railway Mission

Railway Mission is an independent, non-denominational Christian charity, offering independent, confidential, impartial pastoral care to the railway community and members of the public affected by rail operations. Their chaplains offer face-to-face year around support, especially during an individual's time of loneliness, stress, depression, bereavement or illness.

Railway Mission
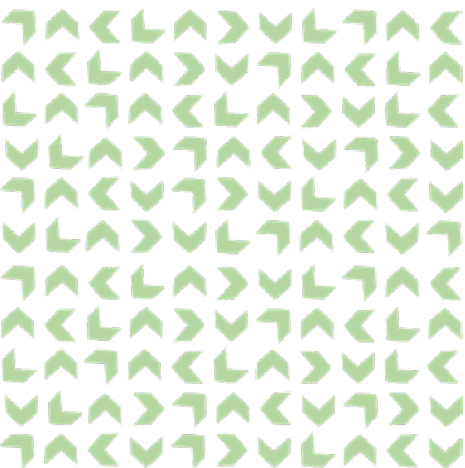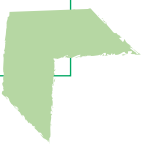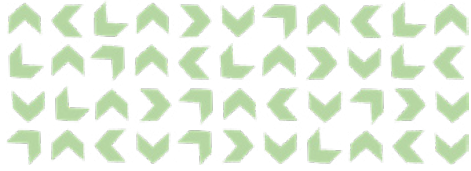
Samaritans Rail Programme

Samaritans has worked in partnership with Network Rail and the wider rail industry since 2010 to reduce suicides on the railway and support those affected by them. Work with the rail industry includes campaigns, training, best practice guidance, community engagement and outreach. The programme includes a team of Samaritans staff embedded in Network Rail regions, who work closely with the rail industry to host community engagement events at stations and in community settings across the UK to raise awareness of Samaritans services and campaigns for passengers and members of the public.

Campaigns include Real People, Real Stories, which shares real stories from men who have been through tough times, encouraging other men to seek help, and a bystander campaign, Small Talk Saves Lives, which aims to empower the public to trust their instincts and start a conversation if they think someone needs help at railway stations and other public settings. Additionally, the Brew Monday campaign takes place every January and encourages human connection, reminding everyone to reach out for a "cuppa and a catch-up" with the people you care about; the campaign is now one of the biggest in the Samaritans rail calendar with over 80 station events taking place in 2023.

Samaritans has trained more than 27,000 rail staff and British Transport Police in suicide prevention since 2010, saving lives across the network. On average, of those who have attended the MSC course, 96 per cent say they felt their self confidence in being able to engage with a potentially suicidal person had increased. Following training, around 13 per cent of delegates have engaged with a potentially suicidal person and used the skills learned on the course in the following six months. The trauma support course, which is highlighted in this report, aims to support those impacted by traumatic events on the railway, giving them tools to support their own or, if they a manager, their team's recovery.

Samaritans volunteers are also an integral part of the programme, offering emotional support to rail staff and passengers alike following a rail incident. On average, volunteers offer this support to station staff and passengers 70 times a year.

Rail industry suicide prevention programme | Samaritans

Conclusions

This study has examined the provision of mental health support in the UK rail industry, and has offered an understanding of the issues and barriers to seeking support for mental health within the rail sector. The report has highlighted the diverse and complex nature of the industry, as well as the challenges and risk factors that impact the mental wellbeing of rail staff on a regular basis.
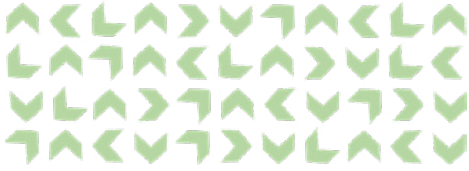
Encouragingly, the study has identified some promising initiatives and measures that are in place to support mental health in the industry – most notably the establishment of the Railway Mental Health Charter. To build on these positive steps, the rail industry must invest further in mental health provision; not only is this vital in supporting rail employees, but it will also benefit rail organisations financially.

The findings from this report present an opportunity for organisations to reflect and review their current provisions for staff mental health, and they highlight some key steps the rail sector can take to improve employee wellbeing. We have developed a set of recommendations for organisations to implement, including creating a comprehensive mental health strategy, tailored to the specific needs of each individual organisation, and cultivating a positive and supportive work culture that prioritises employee wellbeing.

Overall, this report underscores the crucial importance of prioritising mental health within the rail industry and outlines key steps that can be taken to improve mental health provision and support for employees. By implementing these recommendations, the rail industry can work towards creating a safer, healthier, and more productive work environment for all employees.

In order to build upon the insights gained from this study, further research is needed to examine the following areas:

- **Equality and diversity in mental health support:** Certain employee groups may face additional challenges when it comes to accessing mental health support. Further research is needed to better understand these disparities and to identify strategies for promoting equality and inclusivity in mental health support services.

- **Support for staff with neurodiversity:** Further research is needed to identify the types of support and accommodations that can help neurodivergent individuals to thrive in the rail sector, such as flexible working arrangements, sensory-friendly workspaces, and targeted training and development opportunities.

Recommendations

By acting on these recommendations, rail organisations can implement or enhance their mental health and wellbeing strategies, target specific areas of need, and evaluate the effectiveness of their initiatives.

Strategy
All rail organisations should have a mental health and wellbeing strategy in place that responds to the specific needs and circumstances of their workforce. Strategies should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure ongoing engagement.

Engaging, nurturing and developing talent
Organisations must involve, foster, and enhance the skills of staff to identify and discuss mental health with their colleagues as well as direct them toward mental health services when necessary. This can be integrated with existing skills training programs.

Grievance and complaints procedures
Having effective grievance and complaints procedures is critical for the rail industry to ensure that employees feel supported and valued in their workplace. Organisations must invest time and resource into reviewing and updating these processes to ensure that they are fit for purpose and meet the needs of their workforce.

Support Frameworks
This includes peer support, trauma support and consistency of support across the sector

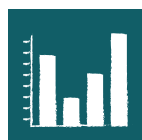**Sharing of good practice**
Sharing of good practice is a crucial aspect of organisational learning and development of mental wellbeing support. It involves identifying successful strategies, processes and approaches that have worked well, and sharing this knowledge with others in the sector.

Culture
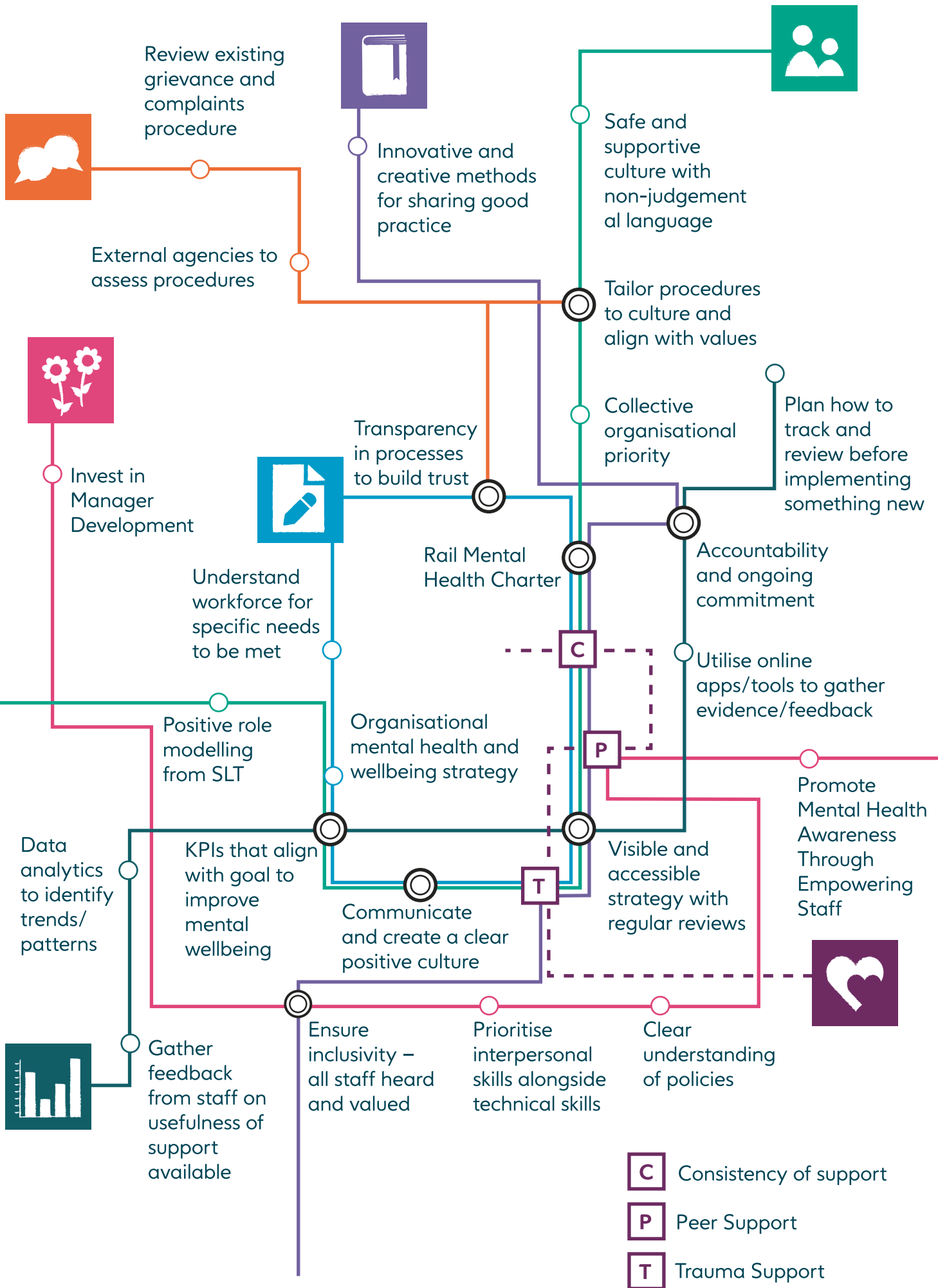Organisations within the rail sector should prioritise building and fostering a positive and inclusive culture that promotes work-life balance for all staff and provides opportunities for team building and socialisation. When staff feel valued and included, it has a positive impact on their job satisfaction, productivity, and overall wellbeing.
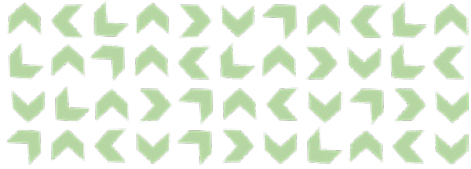
Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)
Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) is a critical process that helps organisations assess the effectiveness of their support services. MEL should be an ongoing process that is integrated into an organisation's culture. Regularly reviewing and evaluating programs and services will ensure you continually improve the support you offer to staff. It will also show your on-going support for mental health, and sends out a clear message that you value your staff.

Review existing grievance and complaints procedure

Innovative and creative methods for sharing good practice

Safe and supportive culture with non-judgemental language

External agencies to assess procedures

Tailor procedures to culture and align with values

Invest in Manager Development

Transparency in processes to build trust

Collective organisational priority

Plan how to track and review before implementing something new

Understand workforce for specific needs to be met

Rail Mental Health Charter

Accountability and ongoing commitment

C

Utilise online apps/tools to gather evidence/feedback

Positive role modelling from SLT

Organisational mental health and wellbeing strategy

P

Promote Mental Health Awareness Through Empowering Staff

Data analytics to identify trends/ patterns

KPIs that align with goal to improve mental wellbeing

Visible and accessible strategy with regular reviews

T

Communicate and create a clear positive culture

Gather feedback from staff on usefulness of support available

Ensure inclusivity – all staff heard and valued

Prioritise interpersonal skills alongside technical skills

Clear understanding of policies

C Consistency of support
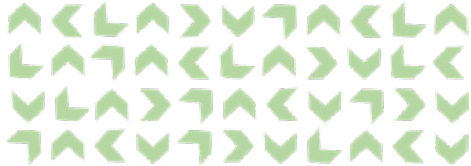
P Peer Support

T Trauma Support

Strategy

All rail organisations should have a mental health and wellbeing strategy in place that responds to the specific needs and circumstances of their workforce. Strategies should be regularly reviewed and updated to ensure ongoing engagement.

- All rail organisations need a strategy for mental health and wellbeing. Many have one in place already and others are developing theirs – not all strategies will need to start from scratch.

- Organisations are encouraged to sign up to The Railway Mental Health Charter and to use their guidance to inform their existing or new strategies.

- Organisations are also encouraged to use comprehensive guidance provided by Mind for implementing their 'Thriving at Work' mental health standards for employers.

- Strategies will differ depending on the size, type and structure of the organisation. Each organisation will need to ensure that they understand their workforce to create a strategy that responds to the specific needs of their employees.

- Small businesses may not have formal policies for every situation, but they can still develop a clear, positive culture and approach towards mental health and should communicate this clearly to staff.

- Mates in Mind offer organisations a number of tools and resources such as posters, infographics and factsheets which can help with raising awareness of mental health within the workplace: www.matesinmind.org/training-and-resources/information-and-resources

- Organisations should ensure that their mental health strategy is visible and accessible to all staff, including new starters and those on the frontline. This can be achieved through regular communication and ongoing engagement with the strategy, with regular reviews and check points. Reaching frontline staff may be achieved through the use of clear, visually appealing information such as infographics and myth busters on posters and noticeboards.

- Developing and implementing an effective mental health strategy may demand time and resources, but the benefits it will offer to employees, organisations, and society as a whole are worth the investment. By enhancing employee well-being, morale, engagement, productivity, retention, and recruitment, the dividends can be significant.

- The RMHC can provide a foundation for building a comprehensive strategy, allowing organisations to gradually develop and refine their approach over time.

- Establishing clear ownership and accountability will be crucial for the success of the strategy.

Mates in Mind offer organisations a number of tools and resources such as posters, infographics and factsheets which can help with raising awareness of mental health within the workplace:

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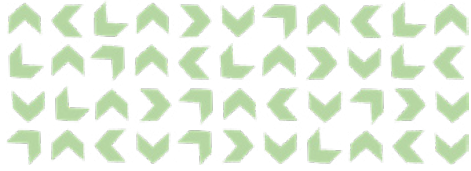
Culture

Organisations within the rail sector should prioritise building and fostering a positive and inclusive culture that promotes work-life balance for all staff and provides opportunities for team building and socialisation. When staff feel valued and included, it has a positive impact on their job satisfaction, productivity, and overall wellbeing.

- Rail organisations can begin building a positive and inclusive culture by celebrating the concept of the collective railway family, which can help to build connections between staff and promote a sense of community. This is important in all working areas but especially for staff in roles that involve lone working.

- The Railway Mental Health Charter provides strong guidance on creating and building an open and inclusive culture that organisations can follow.

- There needs to be open conversations about mental health and the support available to staff during the recruitment process and at regular intervals throughout employment.

- Promoting work-life balance is essential to the wellbeing of all staff, especially those who work shifts. Organisations can make simple, practical steps to support these staff by allowing them to express their preferences for shift patterns, providing ample advance notice of their schedules and providing them with regular, stable, shift patterns.

- Organisations should encourage open communication and feedback between staff and management, so that staff feel comfortable sharing their ideas and concerns.

- It is important to ensure that the culture is safe and supportive for all staff, with an emphasis on using non-judgemental language.

- Organisations must embrace mental health as a collective priority rather than an individual challenge. Whilst it remains the responsibility of all staff, senior leaders are best placed to change the culture from the top down. Positive role modelling from senior leaders is essential in creating a culture of trust and openness.

The Railway Family

The idea of a railway family refers to the generations of the same family who have worked, or continue to work, in the railway industry. This is a long-standing tradition in the UK, with some families having worked in the industry for many years.

The concept extends to the wider community of railway employees who have developed a sense of camaraderie and a shared sense of purpose. It is about creating a sense of community and shared purpose among railway employees. It can be an important way to improve motivation and job satisfaction, and to pass on knowledge and skills from one generation to the next.

Sharing of good practice

Sharing of good practice is a crucial aspect of organisational learning and development of mental wellbeing support. It involves identifying successful strategies, processes and approaches that have worked well, and sharing this knowledge with others in the sector.

- Whilst traditional methods of sharing good practice, such as case studies, workshops, and conferences, are effective, there is an opportunity to be more innovative and creative with methodology. For instance, using technology to share resources or creating online communities where members can exchange knowledge and insights can be effective ways to share good practice.

- Sharing good practice should be an ongoing commitment rather than a one-time event. It requires a sustained effort to bring people together, create accountability, and link good practice with strategy, as well as with Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL).

- The Railway Mental Health Charter (RMHC) hopes to build on the community aspect of the charter and increase engagement amongst members, encouraging them to share resources and learn from one another.

- To ensure inclusivity across the sector, organisations need to be diverse in both the content and the method of sharing good practice. This means considering a range of topics and approaches, and making sure that the voices of all staff are heard and valued. An example of how some organisations are doing this is Town Hall Meetings (see box).

Town Hall Meetings

Town hall meetings are events where employees come together to hear from senior leaders and managers about the company's direction, goals, and plans. It's a chance for employees to ask questions, share feedback, and engage with the leadership team. These meetings are usually held in a large conference room but for larger or remote companies, virtual or hybrid formats may be used.
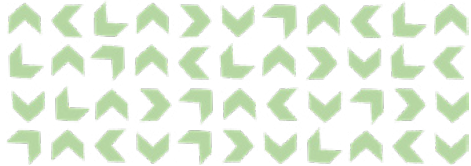
# Engaging, nurturing and developing talent

Organisations must involve, foster, and enhance the skills of staff to identify and discuss mental health with their colleagues as well as direct them toward mental health services when necessary. This can be integrated with existing skills training programs.

- Managers play a crucial role in shaping the workplace culture and environment, and in promoting staff mental health and wellbeing. Organisations must invest in their managers' development by providing them with the necessary support and training to enhance their interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and leadership abilities. Particularly important are building confidence and competence in the skills of asking open questions that enable someone to talk and actively listening without judgement or trying to solve an issue.

- Prioritise interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy and listening alongside technical skills when recruiting and developing staff. This ensures that managers and staff can effectively communicate and collaborate with each other, leading to increased productivity and better workplace outcomes.

- Promote mental health awareness by empowering staff to recognise, understand and address mental health issues in themselves and others. This should be embedded in staff inductions and through a continuous programme of training and development which might include; sharing experiences, case studies from other teams or industries, webinars on specific areas of interest e.g. financial responsibilities and mental health, loneliness and anxiety.

- Ensure that staff have a clear understanding of policies and feel confident and competent in applying them. Communicate policies in an easily accessible and understandable manner, and provide ongoing support and training to staff, particularly those with line management responsibility.

- Provide support and encouragement to staff members who are already supporting their colleagues with their mental health. Recognise the positive impact they are making and ensure that they are taking care of their own mental health.
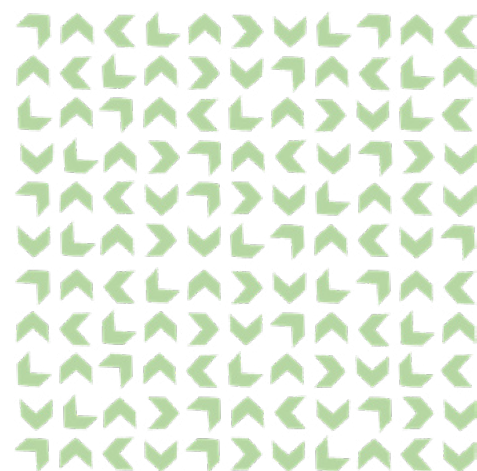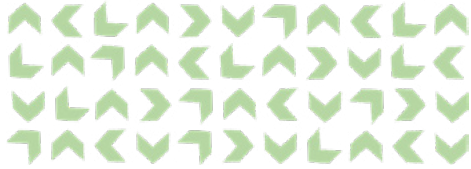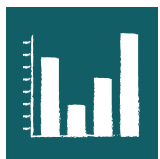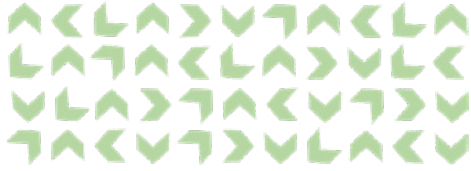
Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) is a critical process that helps organisations assess the effectiveness of their support services. MEL should be an ongoing process that is integrated into an organisation's culture. Regularly reviewing and evaluating programs and services will ensure you continually improve the support you offer to staff. It will also show your on-going support for mental health, and sends out a clear message that you value your staff.

- Develop key performance indicators (KPIs) that align with the goal to improve mental wellbeing – these might include measures of staff absenteeism, staff turnover, and job satisfaction.

- Use surveys and forums to gather feedback from staff about the quality and usefulness of support services. These can be conducted anonymously to encourage honest feedback. The results can be used to identify areas where improvements can be made.

- Consider adapting existing tools such as staff surveys, HR data, and appraisals to collate feedback. Putting relevant questions into these will help build a comprehensive picture, without creating additional work.

- Use data analytics to identify trends and patterns. For example, if staff absenteeism is increasing, you can use analytics to identify the departments or teams where this is happening most often.

- Consider using tools such as survey software, feedback apps, or online polls to make it easier for staff to provide their feedback. These can be particularly useful when staff are working remotely or in different locations.

- MEL can help to bring transparency and accountability – it is a great opportunity to build more trust in internal mechanisms.

- Before implementing anything new, organisations must think about how to track and review.

RSSB has recently created health and wellbeing data dashboards for the industry. Rail companies can report their data to them and they will then create benchmarking reports and work with them to improve their data: RSSB Health and Wellbeing Performance Indicators Report
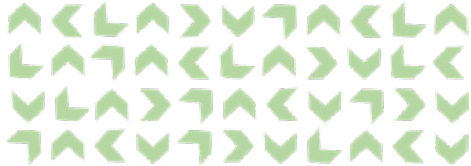
Trauma support

Staff working in the rail industry are exposed to unique and potentially traumatic events. It is essential to provide a supportive culture where employees feel safe to seek support and report any issues they face.

- Organisations should provide appropriate training to staff to help them prepare for and manage the likelihood of traumatic events occurring at work. Prospective employees should be fully informed of the nature of their role and the risks associated with it. Training should be informative and balanced, without being alarmist.

- All staff members in positions that make them vulnerable to exposure to potentially traumatic incidents should receive induction and ongoing training. Companies should identify employees who are most likely to experience traumatic events and target them for specialised training.

- Organisations should raise awareness among their staff about the risk of experiencing potentially traumatic incidents in the workplace. This will help to reduce the stigma associated with seeking help and encourage employees to report any issues they face.

- All staff affected by traumatic incidents, whether directly or indirectly, should have access to appropriate support.

- Organisations must raise awareness of the support that is already available for staff in this area, whether this be support that is offered internally or externally for example via charities such as Samaritans.

- It is crucial for organisations to acknowledge and address all trauma in the workplace including "little t" traumas such as bullying, harassment, discrimination, service disruption and being involved in a grievance or complaint.

- Providing a supportive culture, developing a comprehensive support system, preparing and training staff, and raising awareness can help lessen the impact of traumatic events in the rail sector. Southeastern's TRiM Handbook is a great example of how this can be done within organisations.

- RSSB has developed a comprehensive set of guidelines that offer clear advice to the sector on how to respond to potentially traumatic incidents. Organisations should follow the recommendations provided by RSSB and use them to inform policies and support systems.
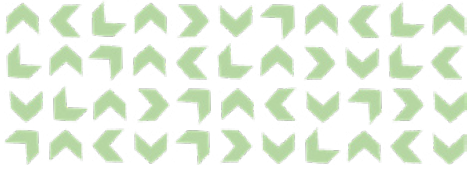
Grievance and complaints procedures

Having effective grievance and complaints procedures is critical for the rail industry to ensure that employees feel supported and valued in their workplace. Organisations must invest time and resource into reviewing and updating these processes to ensure that they are fit for purpose and meet the needs of their workforce.

- It is essential for rail organisations to review their existing grievance and complaints procedures and ensure that they are suitable, fair and efficient. Organisations must also hold regular reviews and updates of these processes to keep up with the changing needs of their workforce.

- An external agency can be helpful in assessing these procedures and suggesting ways to make them more inclusive of mental health. Companies can seek support from organisations such as Acas, who provide free and impartial advice to employers and employees on all aspects of workplace relations or organisations providing consultancy around policy and procedure and mental health, such as our partner, Mental Health at Work CIC.

- The Resolution Framework™ is a great resource that outlines a step-by-step guide rail organisations can follow to implement a new approach to handling grievance procedures.

- It is important to note that these processes are unique to the sector and linked to the culture of the industry. As such, organisations must tailor their procedures and adapt existing processes to meet the specific needs of the workforce and ensure they align with ongoing values.

- Transparency is also essential in these processes. Organisations should share good practice and ensure that employees are aware of the procedures in place. This will help to build trust between employees and management and ensure that issues are resolved fairly and efficiently.
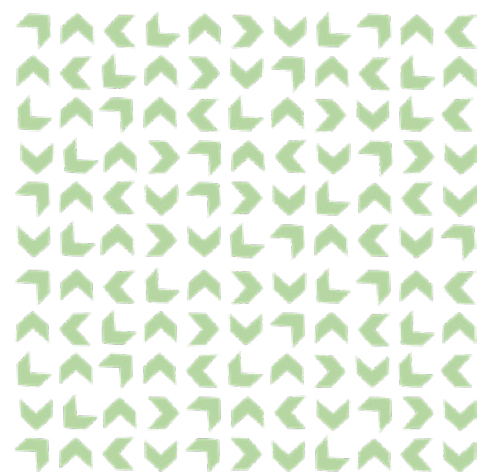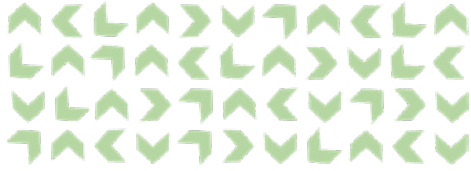
Consistency of support across the sector

The rail sector has a strong reputation for ensuring the physical safety of its staff and passengers. It is now vital that they give the same attention to mental health. There needs to be a parity between physical and mental health as well as consistency across different roles, areas and organisations.

- The industry must establish a visible and accessible framework of support that organisations can bring in as a solid foundation from which they can expand and build upon. The Railway Mental Health Charter provides practical guidelines on what this framework should look like.

- Large organisations within the sector must play a crucial role in promoting wellbeing throughout their supply chains, particularly for those suppliers who may lack the necessary resources or expertise to provide adequate mental health support, occupational health, or counseling services.

- Organisations must recognise that there is no one size fits all approach to mental health support that can work for everyone. It is therefore vital that organisations tailor support to each individual's unique needs and preferences, and to actively listen to what they want. As such, organisations must move away from standardised, tick-box approaches to mental health support and prioritise a personalised approach.
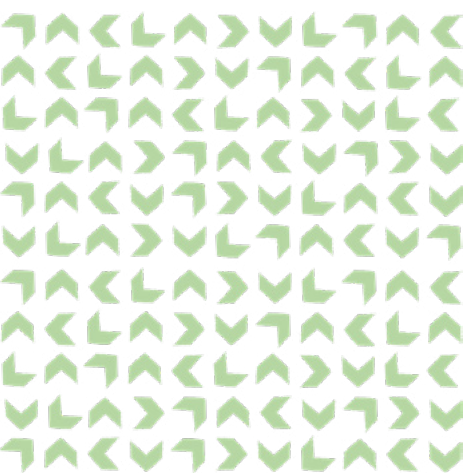
List of resources

The Railway Mental Health Charter (RMHC) provides the industry with a simple, yet robust, framework to protect, promote and support the mental wellbeing of their employees.

RSSB: Responding to potentially traumatic incidents (guidance and toolbox) contain practical tools to support companies review and improve their trauma management.

RSSB: Supporting Staff Following the Death of a Colleague provides guidance to help employers support their staff, including considerations on internal communications content.

RSSB: Mental Health Awareness training helps staff increase their understanding of mental wellbeing. It can be delivered as a face-to-face or remote course.

RSSB: Research on Mental Health Training for Line Managers provides detail around the conditions for effective mental health training for line managers.

RSSB: Wellbeing Journeys guide and support resources advise staff about how to share their stories about living or overcoming health difficulties.

RSSB: Guidance for Developing Mental Health Policies in Rail supports you to reflect on key areas to include in your policy.

RSSB: Promoting Good Mental Wellbeing supports line managers' understanding of how mental wellbeing can be improved and maintained, for them and their team.

RSSB: Health and Wellbeing Manager Competencies Framework provides a common industry approach for the management of health and wellbeing at work.

RSSB: Commissioning Mental Health Services in Rail provides guidance to help you choose a mental health service that responds to your organisation's needs.

RSSB: Mental Health: Signposts and Myth Busting lists a variety of services employees may be able to access if they are struggling with their mental health.

Railway Mission offers independent, confidential and impartial pastoral support to railway staff and members of the public affected by rail operations.

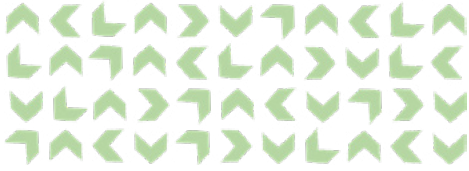Railway Benefit Fund provides help and support to current and retired workers in times of need.

Headshunt are a voluntary organisation, helping members of the UK railway family uphold good mental health; using lived railway mental health experience.

Samaritans Trauma Support Training a one-day Trauma Support Training course for managers, to improve support available to those working in high risk roles.

Samaritans Rail Programme is a partnership with Network Rail and the wider rail industry which aims to reduce suicides on the railway and support those affected by them. The programme includes campaigns, training, best practice guidance, community engagement and outreach.

Andy's Man Club are a men's suicide prevention charity, offering free-to-attend peer-to-peer support groups across the United Kingdom and online

The Book of Man is a support network for offering advice and inspiration to modern men in a time of great change.

List of resources

Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (Acas) gives employees and employers free, impartial advice on workplace rights, rules and best practice. They also offer training and help to resolve disputes.

Resolution Framework is a new approach is to replace organisations grievance, discipline and performance management systems with a fully integrated people policy framework.

Thriving at Work is comprehensive guidance provided by Mind for implementing their mental health standards for employers.

Managing stress at work guidance from HSE for employers on how to protect workers from stress at work.

WHO guidelines on mental health at work provide evidence-based recommendations to promote mental health, prevent mental health conditions, and enable people living with mental health conditions to participate and thrive in work.

Keeping Lone Workers Safe and Secure is a set of tools developed by RSSB to help effectively manage the risks associated with lone working in rail.

Key Industry Topics - Fatigue and Alertness a set of resources from RSSB on how to manage fatigue in the rail industry.

Work-Related Violence Involving Members of the Public research commissioned by RSSB outlines intervention to effectively manage the issue of customer on staff violence.

RSSB Wellbeing Champion Programmes: Toolbox and Training Needs good practice guidelines for establishing a wellbeing champion project and effective training for local wellbeing champions
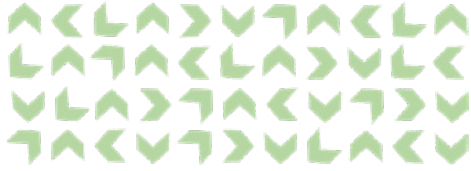
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Department for Transport

GWR | Great Western Railway

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