

Mental health: The true health and safety crisis in construction

Key findings from a rare survey of more than 1,400 UK construction site workers

Causeway insights | April 2024



In partnership with



Strike out stigma.
Build back stronger



Forward

Mental health is the true health and safety crisis in the construction industry today.

That's what we've found evidence of while talking to construction site workers up and down the country.

Despite some positive indications that things are beginning to improve – including the importance of conversation around mental health in construction being recognised at an industry level – there is still a long way to go.

The industry's mental health crisis still shows little sign of abating, so we cannot afford to stop pushing forward on this issue.

Shockingly, **we are still losing on average two construction workers to suicide every working day**, and studies have shown that male site workers are disproportionately affected by mental health issues. However, they are often deemed the most vulnerable but hardest-to-reach demographic in the construction industry, so we need to do more to support them.

We should be providing support beyond just signposting workers using posters or making them aware of initiatives whereby the onus is on individuals to reach out; that first step towards getting help is often the most difficult one to take, so we should do our best to meet people halfway. It's often said that when asking someone if they're OK, you should pose the question twice as the first response might not always be an honest one.

That's why we believe it's important to get employees talking, to present them with an opportunity to express how they're feeling mentally. With the help of our dedicated mental health ambassador Trevor Steven – an ex-England and Everton football player – we have invested in doing exactly that. While people can often be reluctant to

open up at first, we have found in our experience that approaching them in person is typically more successful in encouraging them to reflect on their feelings.

That said, there is still a long way to go if we are going to achieve real change on the ground. We strongly believe that intervention on site is key, as is a new approach led by the Government.

We need to work collaboratively and commit to doing better, which is why we're campaigning for mental health to be as seriously regarded in the industry as health and safety.

Here, we present:

- The results of our unique survey focused on mental health among construction site workers
- Causeway's pledge and plea to businesses to improve mental health industry-wide
- Our plan to lobby the government for a change in procurement practices to encourage more mental health support in construction

Thanks for reading.

Phil Brown, Chief Executive

You may find some of the themes in this report upsetting. If you'd like to access support or advice, the **Samaritans** are available to call 24/7 on 116 123. Alternatively, you can also contact the construction industry-specific charity **Lighthouse Club** by calling their support line on 0345 605 1956 or by texting HARDHAT to 85258.

If you're in the Liverpool area, you can access The People's Place – a dedicated Everton in the Community-run mental health facility at Goodison Park. You can read more about this towards the end of this report.





Research Methodology

Strike out stigma. Build back stronger

Between May 2022 and September 2023, our mental health ambassador Trevor Steven visited construction sites up and down the country.

During this time, he gathered responses from 1,439 workers who provided accurate insights into the reality of mental health in construction.

We spoke to people in a variety of roles, from trade-specific and general labourers to plant operators, surveyors and engineers.

Respondents were most commonly employed on a full-time basis, but it's worth noting that construction sites are often populated by workers who have been subcontracted

temporarily. Therefore, they might not receive the same benefits as those employed on a permanent basis. According to Government data carried out in 2018, it appears that almost half of construction workers could lack the security of a permanent role.

Most surveys in the sector tend to be completed by office-based employees but our approach has been to use the subject of football to kickstart conversations and get much more honest and open opinions from trades and site-based workers.

Such personnel very rarely tend to complete questionnaires so it's uncommon to gain insights as valuable as the ones we have been able to collate on site.



“We’ve had some very frank conversations over the last 18 months about the reality of working in the industry and how it can impact mental health.”

Trevor Steven, ex-Everton and England football player and Causeway mental health ambassador

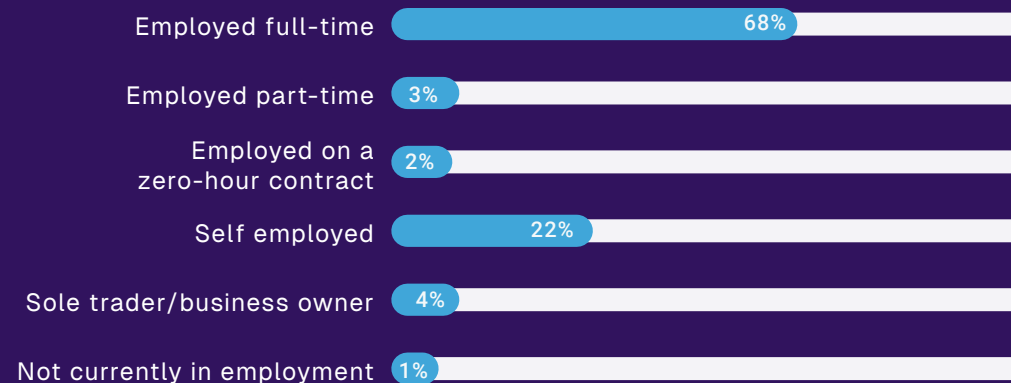


Trevor spoke to workers on sites in the following areas:

- Manchester
- Liverpool
- Stafford
- Caudon
- Birmingham
- Walsall
- Nottingham
- Hemel Hempstead
- Stratford
- Kings Cross
- Covent Garden
- Ruislip
- Southampton



Audience breakdown by current employment situation





Key findings

Strike out stigma. Build back stronger

More than half of UK construction site workers struggle with their mental health.

The top five mental health problems cited by respondents were: anxiety (40%), depression (37%), fatigue linked to low mood (28%), lack of self-confidence (25%) and feeling overwhelmed (25%).

Other responses when asked 'If you have experienced, or are currently experiencing, any sort of mental health problem, what would you describe it as?' included post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Just 21% said they have been diagnosed by a GP or other professional as having a mental health problem, which indicates there is a large group of construction site workers having to cope with undiagnosed symptoms

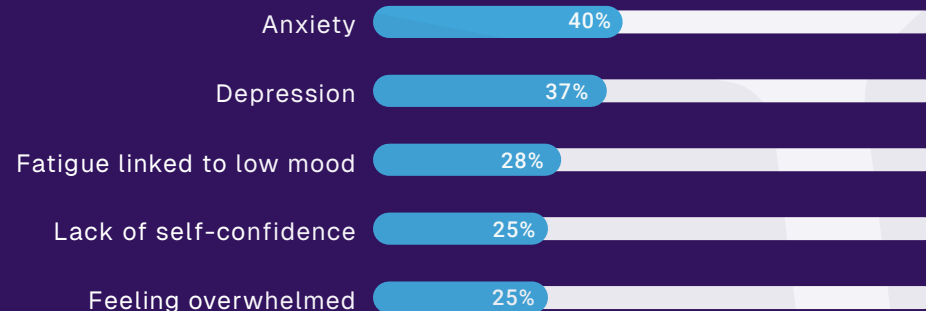


56%

of those surveyed were either currently experiencing or have experienced a mental health problem in the past.



The top five mental health problems cited by respondents were:



12%

have experienced, or are currently experiencing, suicidal thoughts



“These figures are frankly shocking and really highlight the need for intervention. Our survey was completed anonymously, meaning we couldn’t intervene at the point of contact, but we did ensure signposting was in place so that people could access support if they needed it.”

Trevor Steven, ex-Everton and England football player and Causeway mental health ambassador

Workers are plagued by worries about unrealistic deadlines, poor work/life balance and inadequate staffing.

When asked what they think contributes to poor mental health in the construction industry, 59% said long and irregular working hours.

This was followed by financial pressures (50%), lack of job security (45%), tight deadlines (43%) and site culture (41%).

More personal issues such as bereavement, divorce, and financial problems, as well as navigating parenthood, were also cited.

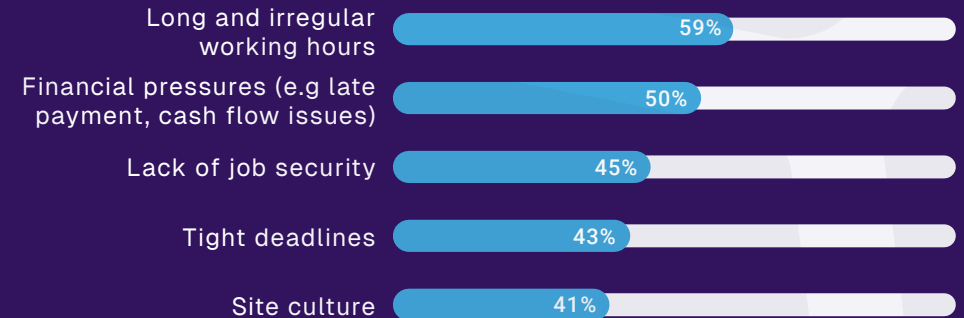
What's more, the transient nature of construction site work means employees get anxious about where their next job is going to come from.



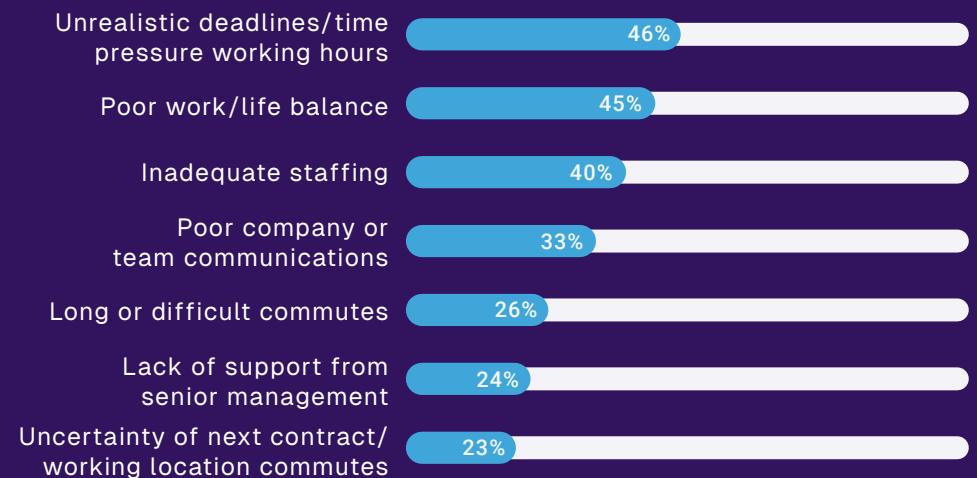
“[There is a] lack of support from the line management. [They tend to be] too interested in getting the job over the line. I was told to leave my issues on the doorstep and not bring them to work.”



What contributes to poor mental health in the construction industry



Workplace stress can be attributed to:





“The continual turnover of staff and management (the continued reliance on temporary agency labour) makes it **difficult to develop relationships with co-workers** in which open communication can actually feel comfortable.”



“Managers in the construction industry need to talk more about **positive things on site**. Most of the time they raise only negative points, making people feel under pressure and as though they aren’t doing enough.”



“**[We] do not get full pay for mental health issues in the construction environment, which is poor considering construction is one of the worst for mental health and suicide deaths.**”



The majority (80%) of employees agree that their company has a responsibility to support their mental health.

86% believe someone should be officially responsible for mental health and wellbeing at their place of work. Despite this, more than a third (35%) said they don't think their company is doing enough to support employees in this area.

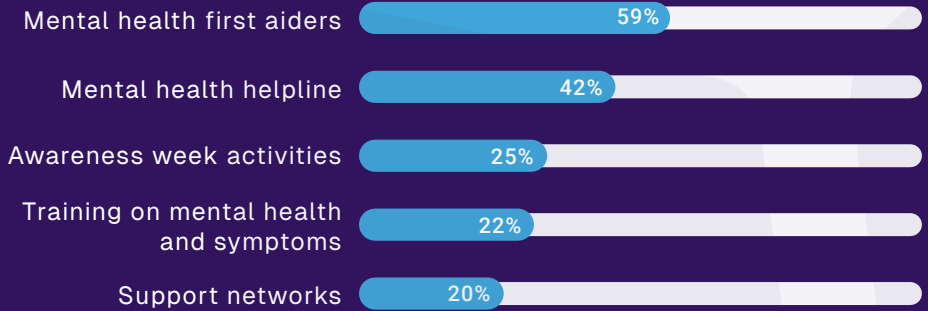
Flexible working was cited by just 19%, and the reality is bleak in some cases. Staff can be expected to sacrifice their holiday allowance to deal with personal issues like caring for loved ones or finding a new place to live, which is causing added stress.



“[There are a] few mental health posters to cover [themselves] but personally [I] believe it's a front. In 10 years of working in construction, I've never experienced a site that seems to really care about your mental wellbeing.”



The most common mental health and wellbeing initiatives currently in place are:



85%

believe someone should be officially responsible for mental health and wellbeing at their place of work.



“A big reason for mental health issues in construction is the fact you don’t get financially supported if you require time off to fix yourself. In other sectors, employees will receive full pay for a period of sickness absence. As a construction worker, this isn’t the case and is a major contributing factor and catalyst to these high suicide rates.”



The majority think using technology to manage mental health is a good idea.

We asked participants what sort of technology they thought would be useful.



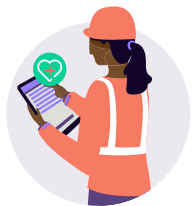
78%

would be in support of tech that gives them direct access to external, confidential support such as counsellors, a dedicated helpline or chat function.



72%

are open to having access to an app or a website that provides information and resources to help them manage their mental health.



66%

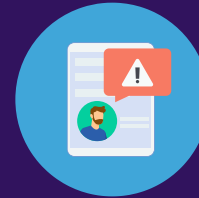
would welcome technology that automatically checks in on their physical wellbeing.



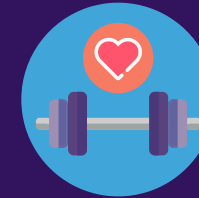
65%

are in support of technology that monitors their work patterns to make sure they are taking breaks and working for a safe amount of time.

Other suggestions included:



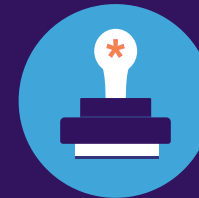
An app that allows you to report concerns about others



Gym incentives



Lessons in breathing techniques



Regulations to force employers to implement better mental health by improving work/life balance



Company team-building events

Two-thirds of respondents said they would feel comfortable with an employer monitoring their mental health and wellbeing, if they remained anonymous. And half would be happy to be monitored even if it wasn't done anonymously.

These results show there is a preference towards intervention on site and a willingness to open up about mental health if the opportunity arose through active monitoring.



Football could be used to kickstart change

Having been a professional footballer, I left one traditionally fairly macho environment and entered another by coming to work in the construction industry.

Construction sites, like football clubs, are a melting pot of different people, with different backgrounds, ages, religions and races. Both are still tied to working-class roots and offer challenges to survive and fit in.

Historically, neither environment has been a place to talk about mental health. When I started as a pro for Everton in the 1980s, talking about such things would be seen as a sign of weakness.

However, that's where the road begins to part. Football, and sport in general, has made great strides in destigmatising issues around mental health. We have seen sporting stars and others in the public eye open up about mental health. The conversation has started, the structures put in place, and people are beginning to feel more comfortable – bit by bit – to share their worries and concerns regarding mental health.

Whereas in construction, the statistics around suicide rates tell an opposing story, and the state of mental health in the construction industry is poor.



Something has to change, and new approaches need to be adopted. It's time to think outside of the box.

We understand that people are not always happy talking about their problems or feelings but getting people talking is widely cited as being key to tackling poor mental health. Football offers a potential route in; it is a sport that brings people together, and I've found it to be an effective conversation starter among construction site workers.

We strongly believe that the construction industry can learn lessons from sport and take advantage of the very obvious connections and emotional relationships that exist between construction and football. Therefore, some of the questions in our mental health survey were designed to explore how we could use football to tackle mental health head on.

Trevor Steven, ex-Everton and England football player and Causeway mental health ambassador

The majority (67%) of workers we spoke to were football fans

What's more, **58%** said they would or might be more likely to access mental health support if their **chosen club offered it**.

Of those, **32%** cited a **sense of trust and loyalty** to the club as a reason, while **22%** said it would provide a **sense of anonymity**, and **19%** said the club wouldn't judge them.



“While [it's] good to have workplace support, sometimes a **distraction outside of work might be more beneficial**. Even if [you're] not a football fan, the ability to meet/mix with people from the sport and discuss matters could be a help.”



“Using connections to football and the lessons learned in sport helped people to speak more freely about their mental health.”

Trevor Steven, ex-Everton and England football player and Causeway mental health ambassador





“I’m not a football fan but I do think that, for those that are, this [would be] such a great initiative, giving an **avenue of communication in another male-dominated environment**. It’s about breaking down barriers and taboos and making it acceptable to talk and communicate; any channel that can break down this stigma and culture of not talking about how you’re feeling is long overdue and can only be a good thing.”



Leading the way with Everton in the Community

On the theme of using football as a vehicle for change, we know from our charity partner Everton in the Community (EitC) that using club loyalty and the power of the badge can be effective in tackling social issues such as mental health.

EitC has been providing mental health programmes and support across Merseyside for more than 15 years, helping people with a range of diagnosed mental illnesses and promoting the risks of poor mental health to the public.

In 2023, EitC opened The People's Place – the first purpose-built mental health and well-being hub attached to a Premier League football club – which Causeway is proud to have played a part in creating.

Operated with support from the NHS and other partner charities, The People's Place provides a focal point for activities around suicide prevention and positive mental health. It is staffed by a range of specialists, including GPs, mental health nurses, and experts in specific areas such as PTSD and bereavement. As well as the healthcare facilities, the building also includes spaces to deliver learning, community events, sport and other physical activities.

We believe that The People's Place is a perfect example of how to use passion for the game to generate passion for improving mental health among construction workers. We hope it can act as a blueprint that others within sport can follow to address this issue.





What next?

Strike out stigma. Build back stronger

The construction industry's mental health crisis is real and here to stay.

Unless we rally together as a whole in the name of change.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community.

At Causeway, we fundamentally believe that maintaining stable mental health requires a healthy balance between work and home life and that psychological safety is a prerequisite for success in the construction industry.

Intervention on site is key

The results of our survey show there is not only a need for intervention on site but also an appetite for it. This is supported by anecdotal evidence that workers do open up about their mental health when they are approached.

This willingness to express true feelings must be embraced.

We feel passionately about the responsibility of construction firms to do what they can to better prioritise the mental health of their employees.



Pushing beyond the boardroom and why this needs a governmental approach

Through this research, our aim is to lobby the government – centrally and locally – to drive a change in legislation to support better mental health in the construction industry.

Specifically, we want to see mental health policies mandated for all procurement frameworks, contracts, and processes.

We are committed to encouraging and promoting improved mental health practices in all elements of our business.

This involves ensuring mental health policies are as embedded into Causeway as all other policies are and treating them as seriously as core health and safety policies.

We urge all clients procuring construction products and services and the entire construction supply chain to do the same so we can work collaboratively to enact real change.

Our Pledge

Join us today by signing up to the following pledge:

“I commit to creating a better workplace environment in construction that includes mental health support for my workforce. I further pledge to back the campaign for mental health provision to be part of the health and safety and social value procurement conditions for future construction contracts.”

The construction industry does have the capacity to change, despite the tragic statistics. Just look at how much progress has been made in other areas of health and safety.

Together we can strike out stigma and build back stronger.





Causeway

In partnership with



Everton
in the Community

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