

The current state of mental wellbeing in UK workplaces



Lanes
Group plc



Introduction

Since the introduction of the Health and Safety at Work Act in 1974, health, safety and wellbeing have become increasingly important issues in UK workplaces, but the definition of these terms has become broader and more textured in the last few years.

Businesses have always understood the need to protect the physical safety of their staff, but rising awareness of mental health issues means they are now becoming a key part of this conversation.

Stress, anxiety, depression and general unhappiness at work can seriously reduce a person's quality of life, making it harder for them to connect with and find satisfaction in their job and responsibilities. Not only does this put their overall wellbeing at risk, but it can also have a serious effect on their professional capabilities - statistics from the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) indicate that depression and anxiety disorders cost the global economy \$1 trillion (more than £800 billion) each year in lost productivity.

As such, most British companies now see looking after the mental wellbeing of their workforce as a priority, which is undoubtedly a positive development. However, nationwide studies have indicated that poor mental health in the workplace remains a widespread issue - and suggested that some companies could be taking much more effective actions to address the problem than they are at present.



In this whitepaper from [Lanes Group](#), one of the UK's most prominent drainage sector employers, we will examine the current state of mental health in UK workplaces by drawing on data from the aforementioned national studies, including our own research into professional wellbeing. We will also explore the causes of poor workplace mental health, and look at some of the steps businesses are taking to address the issue - as well as examining key areas for improvement.

By studying the current trends and working out how best to tackle them proactively, we hope to contribute to a national conversation that leads to a renewed focus on meaningful improvements in mental wellbeing for workers across all sectors of UK industry.



The scale of the current workplace stress problem

According to the [most recent Labour Force Survey](#) from the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE), a total of 595,000 workers suffered from work-related stress, depression or anxiety in 2017-18, including both new and long-standing cases.

Although the rate of work-related mental ill health was broadly flat compared to the previous year, this is nevertheless a trend that has grown worse in recent years. The total number of working days lost due to these conditions in 2017-18 was 15.4 million days - equating to an average of 25.8 working days being lost for each of the 595,000 workers.

These HSE statistics underline the broad impact of the problem, while other studies have provided a clearer look at how a lack of attention to mental wellbeing manifests on a practical level. For example, the [2018 UK Workplace Stress Survey](#) of 3,000 individuals from the employee engagement platform Perkbox suggests that 21% of British workers experience moderate to high levels of work-related stress several times per week, with 25% saying stress causes them to struggle to be as productive at work as they normally would be, while 22% said this makes them feel disengaged from their work.



Meanwhile, data from the [Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's \(CIPD\) latest Health and Well-being at Work study](#) highlights some even more worrying trends, with nearly three-fifths of the 1,078 organisations it surveyed seeing an increase in the number of common mental health conditions among employees in the last 12 months, and only a small minority reporting a decrease. Similarly, stress-related absence has increased at nearly two-fifths of organisations in the last year, with just 8% saying it has fallen.

Lanes Group's findings

To help contribute to this discussion, we recently conducted our own professional wellbeing survey of 1,047 people from across multiple sectors, with our findings affirming the view that many UK employees have been feeling the stress caused by unrealistic workloads, long hours and mismanaged expectations.

80%

Our survey showed that 80% of respondents say they are required to work outside of their contracted hours.

61%

61% admitting to answering work calls or responding to work emails while on holiday.

22%

It was also revealed that 22% of those who replied have had to take time off work due to stress...

10%

...with 10% having had to do so in the last year.

The statistics also indicate that many people are struggling to disconnect from their work-related stress even after getting home - the average worker takes 67 minutes to unwind after getting home from work, meaning they do not stop thinking about work until 19:38 in the evening.



What are the main causes of work-related stress?

One of the most worrying aspects of these studies is the fact that respondents seem to be consistently pointing to the work itself, or aspects of how their responsibilities are managed, as the primary cause of the stress they feel during their working days.

Perkbox’s survey showed that work is overwhelmingly the most common cause of stress in life for British adults in employment, with 59% of those experiencing this, and only 9% saying they never experience work-related stress. Meanwhile, all three studies presented similar results when respondents were asked about the top-ranking causes of workplace stress:

Each of the surveys ranked some form of excessive workload issue as the main cause of stress among respondents, with all but one of the top five factors across all three surveys being internal problems stemming from mismanagement or poor working culture.

This suggests that the vast majority of issues that are damaging workers wellbeing are matters that employers could be doing more to influence.

	HSE	Perkbox	CIPD
1	Workplace pressure (including excessive work and tight deadlines)	Long working hours	Excessive workloads
2	Lack of managerial support	Others’ work performance	Management styles
3	Violence, threats or bullying	Personal work performance	Work relationships
4	Organisational changes	Client satisfaction levels	External factors, including family and relationships
5	Uncertainty about the role	Office politics	Organisational changes

Table 1: Main causes of stress among respondents

Lanes Group's findings

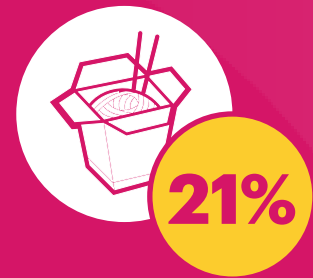
Lanes' survey findings confirmed the finding that many workers are struggling with unmanageable amounts of work.



Around 11% of respondents said their current workload does not allow them to book time off



While 16% do not feel able to ask for time off when sick.

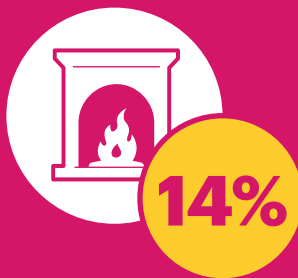


21% are too busy to take a full lunch break.

Our survey also indicated that many people have complaints about adverse working conditions that are causing them stress.



16% say their workplace is too loud.



While 14% said it is too hot.



And 13% described it as being too cold.

Debi Bell, head of HR services at Lanes, said:

"When an employee is struggling, there can be external personal issues that the company may not be aware of. These are difficult to assist with, as people do not always want to discuss their personal problems with their colleagues or bosses.

"Additionally, not having the right tools to complete a job can be highly frustrating, and can be another source of major stress among employees."



Which industries are worst affected by mental wellbeing issues?

All of these statistics demonstrate broad cross-sector wellbeing trends, but it is also important to consider the fact that many of these problems affect some industries and demographics more seriously than others.

The HSE data indicated that stress, depression or anxiety is more prevalent in public service industries, such as education, health and social care, and public administration, while those working in skilled trades, elementary occupations and plant and machinery roles tended to experience lower rates of stress on average. It was also noted that small workplaces had a significantly lower rate of mental wellbeing issues, whereas large workplaces showed a generally higher-than-average prevalence.

The data suggested that female employees were generally more likely to experience work-related mental health issues than males - but given the difficulty that many men have in talking about their own mental health, more thorough investigation is needed here. Certainly, this should not be taken as a sign that workplace stress should be considered a “women’s issue”.





Lanes Group's findings

Our research looked further into the different industries and the types of issues that were most common in different sectors. The research indicated that working conditions vary significantly between different industries, with some sectors experiencing longer hours and more onerous conditions than others.

Of note, the findings revealed that the energy and utilities sector - in which Lanes operates - is the industry where professionals feel the greatest pressure to work outside their contracted hours.

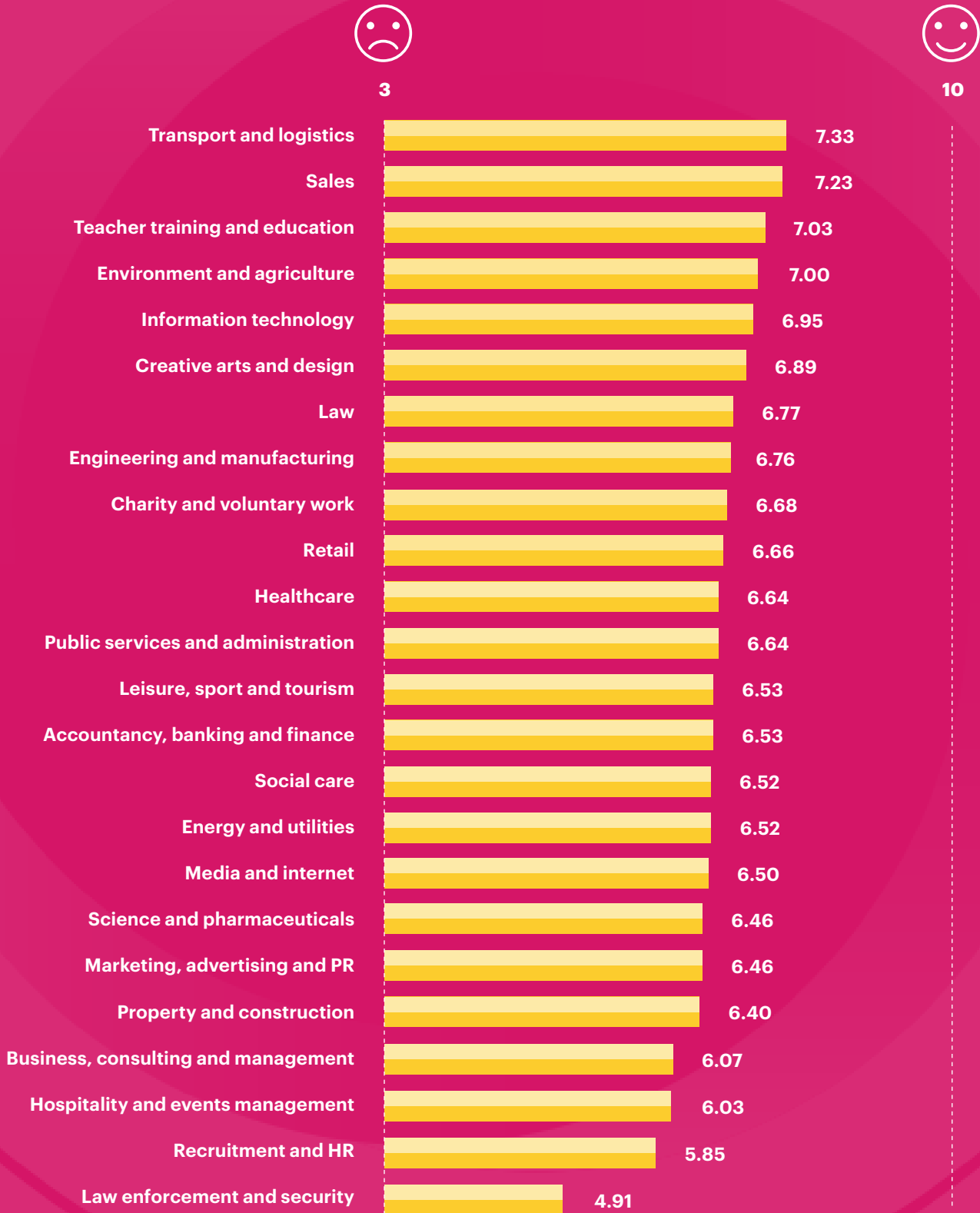
Utilities workers said they do, on average, an extra 3 hours and 19 minutes of work each week on top of their contracted hours - more than any other sector. Perhaps as a result, staff from this sector take the longest to unwind after clocking off, requiring almost two hours until they can stop thinking about work.

When asked how happy they were in their current role on a scale of 1 to 10, people who drive for a living were shown to be most satisfied, with an average score of 7.32. By contrast, field-based workers were least happy, with an average rating of 6.28.

When evaluated by sector, transport and logistics came out ahead with a 7.33 rating, while law enforcement and security came last with a 4.91 rating, and energy and utilities rated in the middle of the pack with a 6.52 score.

Results by sector

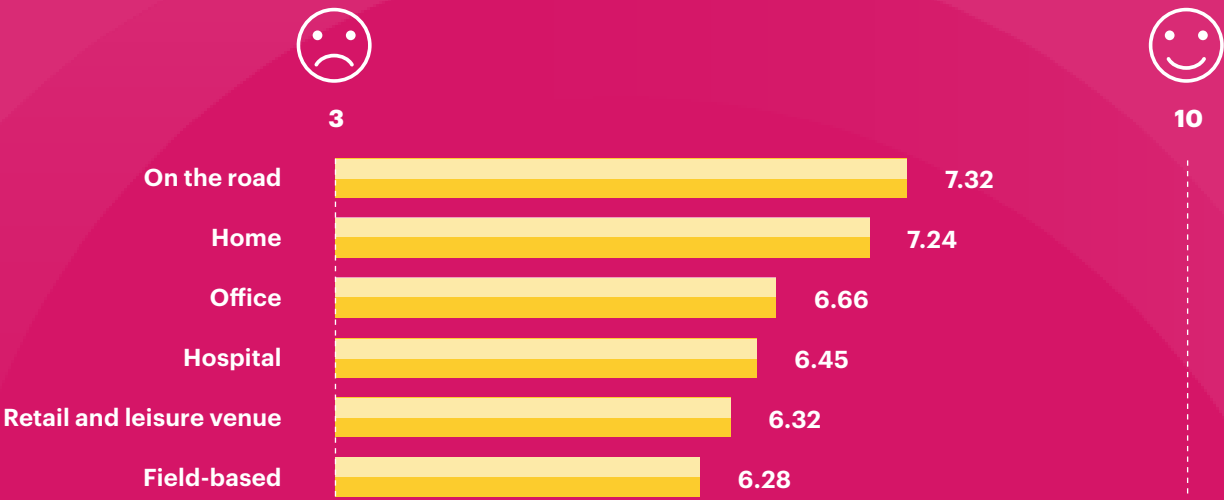
On a scale of 1 - 10, where 1 is not happy at all and 10 is extremely happy, how happy are you in your current role?



Data from research by Lanes Group

Results by place of work

On a scale of 1 - 10, where 1 is not happy at all and 10 is extremely happy, how happy are you in your current role?



Data from research by Lanes Group

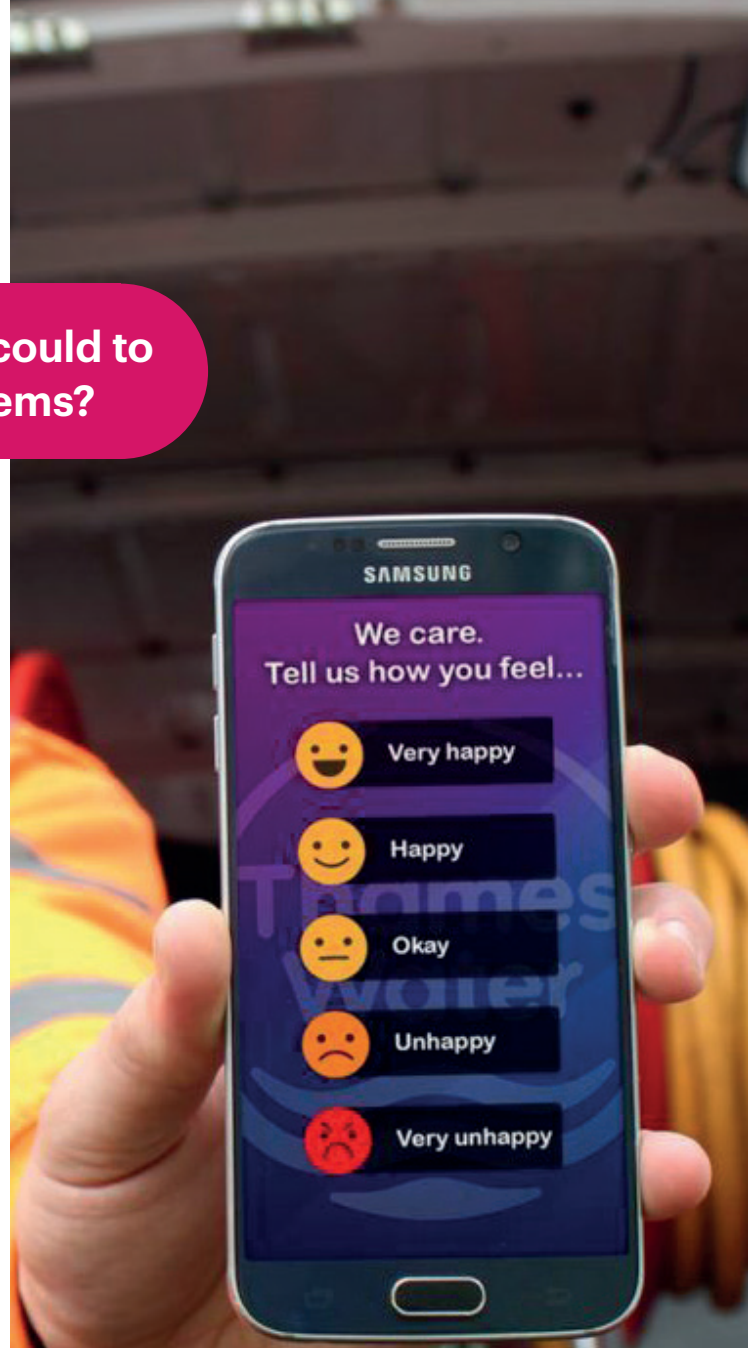


Are businesses doing all they could to tackle mental wellbeing problems?

Making a real difference in improving mental wellbeing means that businesses need to take the issue as seriously as they do physical health, and ensure they are working proactively to support their staff whenever difficulties arise. Unfortunately, the current data suggests that many workplaces are not tackling this problem as effectively as they could be.

Perkbox's research shows that 45% of UK workers say their place of work does not have anything in place to help reduce employees' stress levels and improve their mental wellbeing.

Meanwhile, the CIPD's research indicates that only two-fifths of companies have a dedicated strategy for improving staff wellbeing in place, with a similar percentage saying they prefer to deal with these issues reactively rather than proactively - while one in six are not doing anything to improve employee wellbeing at all.



What's more, the CIPD data highlighted a number of other troubling trends:

- **Only 22%** of businesses critically assess the quality of outcomes for those that participate in activities designed to promote wellbeing.
- **Just under a third** of those who have observed presenteeism (i.e. staff coming to work despite being ill) within their organisation are making an effort to discourage it.
- **Less than half** of those who report their company is taking steps to tackle stress believe their efforts are effective.
- **Only half** of the companies surveyed believe they are effective at supporting staff with mental health issues, or that they actively promote good mental wellbeing.

Lanes Group's findings

The findings from Lanes' survey also offered clear evidence that UK businesses may be struggling to provide their staff with the level of mental health support that they require.

Of those we surveyed:



27%

27% said they do not feel able to speak to their manager about mental health issues.

14%

14% say they do not feel able to speak freely with their superior about workplace issues, such as disputes with colleagues.

10%

A further 10% say they do not feel comfortable opening up to a manager about personal issues that can affect work, such as a bereavement.

Although the majority of companies seem to be performing well on these measures, the fact that a sizeable minority are still falling short suggests that greater awareness of best practice methods for improving staff wellbeing is still required.



Lanes Group's findings

Debi Bell says:

"As a national company, systems of support for employees can sometimes feel disjointed or disconnected, with staff not knowing who they are able to talk to. If employees do not feel they have a space to discuss their issues, this can lead to higher absence, low morale and, in some cases, individuals leaving the company.

"However, despite this, some companies will not invest in extra courses or support schemes, as it will be an extra cost to their bottom line. In some cases, they may not be able to cover the costs of these interventions - or could it be that they are just not aware of these issues?"

Kelly Hansford, our in-house wellbeing practitioner, added:

"Some companies may feel overwhelmed by taking a more proactive approach to mental health issues in the workplace, due to a fear of the unknown, or simply not knowing the right approach or what to say.

"A good starting place is managers having a conversation with their employees. It could even be as simple as asking 'How are you?', and making sure to listen to the reply, rather than being too busy to hear it.

"It's key to building a relationship with your team, allowing them to feel they can speak with you when they are troubled, instead of seeing them at only at a crisis point, when things have deteriorated to the point where major interventions are required."



What more can be done to improve workplace wellbeing?

It is clear that UK businesses have plenty of room for improvement in terms of supporting employee wellbeing in a more proactive and effective way. Fortunately, those that are committed to finding ways to meaningfully deepen this commitment have a number of proven, workable models from which to draw.

The CIPD's Health and Well-being at Work study provides substantial insights into some of the steps that British companies are taking, with most organisations taking part in the report providing at least one wellbeing benefit to employees, whether this be through a health promotion, counselling services or employee assistance programmes.

Although the availability of these schemes tends to depend more on budget availability than staff need at present, many companies are doing admirable work nevertheless. Supportive policies such as leave for family circumstances, flexible work patterns and occupational health involvement are all being widely used to help support staff and reduce absence rates, while regular employee wellbeing assessments - particularly those with a continuous improvement/feedback loop approach - have been shown to deliver positive outcomes.

The CIPD research indicated that training line managers and providing them with tailored support are among the most effective methods for promoting wellbeing and managing both long and short-term absence, while also underlining the importance of ensuring that any wellbeing support schemes are based on a proper understanding of what staff really need.



Lanes Group's findings

Lanes Group is among the companies that employs a proactive approach to monitoring employee wellbeing, through the use of a pioneering app that asks operational colleagues how they feel at the start of every shift.

If they respond to the question by clicking the 'unhappy' or 'very unhappy' buttons, they are offered the option of speaking to our in-house wellbeing practitioner Kelly Hansford to see if she can help. Since the app was introduced, the number of colleagues who record being unhappy or very unhappy has fallen from 8% to just over 1%, and the scheme has won a Utility Week Award and a Water Industry Achievement Award for its impact.

Our survey data backs this up further - although 22% of respondents said they have taken time off work due to stress, this fell to only 14% among Lanes employees, while 93% of our staff members said they feel able to talk to their manager about personal issues that could affect their work.

Kelly explains:

"While this system allows us to monitor trends in the business, its most important function is to give Lanes workers a safe way of asking for help. They know that if they click 'unhappy' on the daily report, they will be getting a call, which is the opening conversation that a great number of them want.

"It's about someone taking time to hear the person, and not just focus on the function they fulfil for us."





Lanes Group's findings

Additionally, Lanes Group has become the first service provider in the water utility industry to support its staff by using trauma risk management (TRiM).

TRiM is a structured method for assessing the impact of a traumatic event on individuals, with their consent, so they can be offered the right kind and level of support for as long as it is needed.

The process is most commonly used to support staff in the military or in the emergency services, but Lanes has funded the training of Kelly Hansford, already a key part of our groundbreaking internal counselling service, to work within the teams as a TRiM practitioner.

Kelly said:

"People respond differently at different times to traumatic events. TRiM gives us a proven way to identify these differences and tailor ongoing support for as long as it's needed.

"Intervention may be as light-touch as having one conversation or monitoring behaviour, or it could be more involved, such as referring an individual for trauma counselling."

TRiM has already helped a number of Lanes' drainage engineers who had been exposed to trauma on the site of a job, and to support colleagues who've experienced traumatic events outside work. It can also assess risks where people are re-traumatised by being reminded of past events.



Moving towards a better future for UK workers

The conclusions of the body of evidence around mental wellbeing in the workplace is clear: although promoting better mental health among staff members has been shown to have a positive effect on morale, efficiency and company performance, many barriers remain in place that are preventing companies from making good on this goal.

As such, the responsibility falls on those organisations that are leading the way on this important issue to continue sharing their knowledge and best practice methods within their industries, while those that are still to catch up will need to adopt an open-minded approach to learning and improving.

By identifying risks to mental wellbeing and embracing proven solutions that put the needs of staff members first, every UK business can cultivate a happy, healthy place to work, where every staff member feels valued, respected and supported in what they do.





Lanes Group plc

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- CCTV surveying
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