

# POSITIVE THINKING

The built environment has improved its record in terms of physical health and safety. Sara Bean finds out how charity Mates in Mind and VINCI FM are working to promote mental wellbeing



**R**ussell Stilwell is a successful businessman and founder of RS Electrical Contractors, a mechanical, engineering and plumbing specialist serving the construction and FM industry. But back in 2010 he found himself coping with extreme anxiety and depression. He tried to ignore it and continued on until, as he describes it: “I couldn’t fight it anymore and I was starting to become someone that my family and I didn’t recognise.” He adds that if he hadn’t received professional help, he probably wouldn’t be here today.

Sadly, his experiences are not unusual. Research suggests that suicide kills far more workers in construction than falls. According to HSE statistics, one in six workers in the UK experiences depression, anxiety or stress, and 91 million work days are lost as a result of mental health-related problems.

While the male-dominated construction and FM sectors have improved their record in terms of physical health and safety, safeguards for employees’ mental wellbeing

is not as well resourced. According to Stilwell, FM and construction go to great lengths to mitigate risks on site – but do little to notice, reduce or mitigate the risks associated with mental ill-health.

After overcoming his own anxiety and depression, Stilwell went on to champion mental wellbeing within his firm and the wider FM and construction sector, sharing his story at the official launch of the charity Mates in Mind in September 2017. Following a successful pilot programme between February and June 2017, Mates in Mind was rolled out across the sector by the Health in Construction Leadership Group (HCLG), with the support of the British Safety Council. Its aim is to raise awareness, address the stigma of poor mental health and improve mental wellbeing in the UK construction industry.

Steve Hails is Director of Health, Safety and Wellbeing at Tideway, the company delivering the Thames Tideway Tunnel, and Chair of Mates in Mind: “We set ourselves a target of reaching 100,000 people in year one and 75 per cent of the industry by 2025.

The charity currently has 188 supporters whose direct employment accounts for over 185,000 employees, so we’re on track. We need to ensure, though, that it’s not just about training and education, it’s the whole approach that Mates in Mind brings, providing support across organisations.”

He continues: “Mental health awareness isn’t a light-switch moment as something you can solve overnight. You need to have commitment from the most senior people within the organisation that this is something they want to address. Mates in Mind can then offer a range of support and access to a variety of resources that allow that foundation to be put in place within the organisation. It’s then about how you introduce and upskill and address the stigma.”

The process, he explains, works in three stages. First is a two-day mental health first aid course which gives people a greater understanding of the causes, and avenues that might be explored to provide co-workers with support and to act as a

signpost for individuals that may come to them with an issue.

Second is a half-day awareness programme called Managing the Conversation, delivered by the British Safety Council. This is directed at supervisors and leaders within a business to give an understanding of how certain elements can impact an individual and put them in a dark place.

The final element is a 45-minute starter conversation for every employee within the workplace. This involves getting a group of people within an environment to start to address the stigma of mental ill-health. It aims to provide an open and confidential space where it's possible to say to individuals, 'it's OK to feel like this. It's normal.'

Says Hails: "The reason I describe the options that way round is that if you start the conversation and open the door without somewhere to go, you could make the situation worse, which is why there should be support networks in place within the organisation. Training plays a part, but most of all it's about addressing the stigma and saying, 'you know what? It's OK to feel like that, because we all do at some point.' People will then stop seeing mental ill-health as a weakness."

**MENTAL HEALTH IN FM**

Within the FM sector, VINCI Facilities is attempting to lead from the front. As part of its Time to Change pledge (see next page), VINCI is focusing on mental health and the wellbeing of its people and those in its supply chain by setting up mental health first aiders, wellbeing champions and emphasising the importance of fairness, inclusivity and respect.

According to Paul Cottam, VINCI Facilities Director and a Non-Executive Director of the British Safety Council, VINCI recognises that investment in mental health and wellbeing is something that creates a legacy; it's not just about being a safe pair of hands, but about taking a wider, longer-term view. A happier, healthier and more productive workforce is more willing to engage with the communities it serves because of its positive outlook.

A key strategy is training up mental health first aiders. Says Cottam: "When we started discussing this a couple of years ago, there were people who were interested and put their hands up, so we discussed it at leadership meetings. Before we knew it we had eight to 10 people who asked to go on the mental health first aid course, who then came back and organised breakout sessions."

According to Hails, the principle behind mental health first aid is very simple: "If you cut your finger you'll go and see a first aider. If you're feeling down and depressed, you can see a mental health first aider." But he warns that it's important to understand the limitations of mental health first aid.

As with physical first aid, if it's beyond a volunteer's limitations they need to know where to go, and this is part of their training. Mental health first aiders are there as a resource. They're not trained psychiatrists; the idea is that they listen, offer a sympathetic ear, look for signs and help to point people on to organisations such as Mind, the Samaritans or Mental Health First Aid England for further support.

In larger organisations there may be an employee assistance programme (EAP) to offer support, but one of Mates in Mind's primary concerns is to address the 95 per cent of people working in construction who are employed by an SME. These are organisations without resources and funds – sometimes without even a dedicated FM or HR department.



"The beauty of being a supporter of Mates in Mind is having access to a range of helpful organisations," says Hails. "There is support available through a national counselling service, and that benefits the SME population. We've also made a commitment through the charity that we will invest back into the SME community, where fulfilling certain criteria will give you access."

**REDUCING THE STIGMA**

Another key aspect, says Cottam, is the way in which employers address the stigma around mental health. For example, people are often afraid of opening up about mental health problems for fear of being side-lined. This is a strong theme of Time to Change, and Mates in Mind provides the practical resources and relationships to help.

"Overcoming the stigma can be achieved in different ways," he says. "Our group HSEQ director introduced us to the Time to Change movement, and in the middle of that we developed our relationship with the British Safety Council and Mates in Mind. We then presented it back to our people by talking about HSE statistics on stress and mental ill-health, and how mental health feeds into our health and wellbeing strategies."

"In the same way that safety went from warnings and prosecutions to promoting a safer zero harm culture, the same needs to go for mental ill-health. This is why at VINCI we start all our conversations with 'how are you?', not just as a standard greeting but with the ethos that 'if you're not OK I'm not, and the people under you won't be.'"

Adds Hails: "You have to have senior level commitment, so it must be more than a

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tick box, or paying lip service to reducing stress if you're working people into the ground. It's about being authentic and genuine in your approach, which is why senior leaders have to lead the way."

One of the primary aims of the charity is overcoming the stigma that surrounds mental ill-health, and – in a sector with a high number of male workers – addressing the specific risks for men. As a director of an FM business which is part of a construction group, Cottam acknowledges the challenge of addressing the stigma of mental ill-health within such a male-dominated sector. "FM can be a stressful job, and having the right level of stress helps performance, but you've also got to recognise when someone is at a tipping point. There's a difference between stress and feeling mentally drained. People put pressure on themselves and keep pushing themselves."

He says he is encouraged by the change of attitude he has noticed, with the biggest conversation at VINCI's recent annual supplier safety day being about mental health and wellbeing.

For his part, Hails is optimistic about the progress being made: "We will obviously draw parallels with the journey we went on with safety, but I think when it comes to mental health we're on a much steeper curve. We are getting closer to where we need to be much more quickly than we did with safety. That's partly down to the way society has grasped the mental health agenda, and we've been assisted in particular by Princes William and Harry. But it can still surprise me. At Tideway we run an annual survey on health and safety, and last year 75 per cent of staff strongly agreed they were happy to talk to their line manager about mental wellbeing, which is the message we're sending out with Mates in Mind."

The charity is certainly showing the wider built environment what can be done. As Cottam remarks, the majority of construction firms proudly show off their British Safety Council logo, and more and more are happy to sport the Mates in Mind logo as well, "which shows that people within that organisation care about the mental health of their staff, suppliers and other stakeholders."

**GOOD FOR BUSINESS**

Hails points out that if you don't create an environment that is diverse, inclusive and supports employees and anyone who works for them, how do you ever expect to attract people into the industry? He believes strongly that if you are a leader

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in any business, it is your responsibility to understand your team – not just what their job entails, but what makes them tick. Without undue prying into people's personal lives, it means creating an environment where you can help them manage their issues.

"If you're in the dark and don't create that type of environment, you will never get the information you require to manage that situation," he says. "I was astonished to find that 75 per cent of those who identify as LGBT+ working in construction go back in the closet when they come to work. That is an astonishing figure. If you've got an individual who can't be themselves, they're going to leave.

"If you'd said to me five years ago that we'd be running mindfulness sessions – not just within the office environment but on our construction sites – I would have laughed, but Mates in Mind is about reducing stigma. It's about having a conversation, looking at statistics that reinforce how to tackle mental ill-health, talking to people and getting them involved with training schemes that they can take back into your business. In this way mental good health is going to be at the core of every business. And it makes good business sense."



**Time to Talk**

Time to Change is organising a Time to Talk Day on 7 February to give everyone a chance to have a conversation about mental health. The event is backed by VINCI Facilities and other employers.

As part of VINCI Construction UK, VINCI Facilities signed up to the Time to Change employer pledge in 2017, committing itself to creating a workplace free from stigma and discrimination.



The pledge makes up a central part of the company's fairness, inclusion and respect agenda. VINCI worked with Time to Change on an action plan to get employees talking about mental health.

Time to Change is England's biggest initiative for raising awareness of mental health and challenging stigma and discrimination. It is run by charities Mind and Rethink Mental Illness and is funded by the Department of Health, Comic Relief and the Big Lottery Fund. It's a growing social movement working to change the way everyone, in all walks of life, thinks and acts about mental health problems.

For more information about Time to Talk Day, visit [www.time-to-change.org.uk/get-involved/timetotalkday2019](http://www.time-to-change.org.uk/get-involved/timetotalkday2019)

