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Taking a strategic approach to improving mental health and wellbeing

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As part of its commitment to its people, Network Rail set itself an ambitious, long-term Occupational Health and Wellbeing Strategy, 'Everyone Fit For The Future', spanning the years 2013 to 2024. Within the Strategy, three of the ten strategic measures of success were specifically related to mental health and wellbeing:

The proportion of employees with a high level of positive mental wellbeing will be 10% better than the general working population;

At least 90% of employees will be assessed as not being excessively troubled by workplace pressures; and

The number of suicides that occur within our workforce will be lower than the comparable national average

In order to achieve these strategic aims, it was necessary to develop a comprehensive, yet focussed, strategic plan for mental health and wellbeing that would provide an overview of the various activities that need to be embedded over the coming years and that could be communicated to various stakeholders to gain their buy-in and commitment. Based on the traditional primary, secondary and tertiary approach to stress management, the plan focuses on a) having appropriate policies and developing line manager skills, b) providing opportunities for employees to build their resilience, c) enabling early advice and support from appropriate health services and d) building a culture of support through awareness and education.

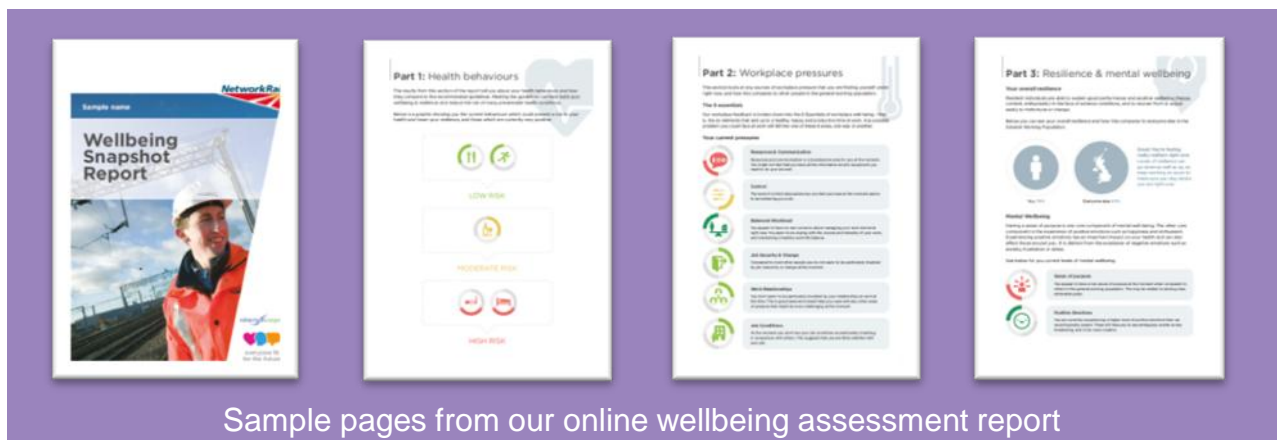


For each of these key areas of focus, three clear activities were identified that would deliver the long-term strategic outcomes set out in the Strategy. Importantly, all of the activities implemented have had to be done on a very small budget and have been designed to take advantage of ways to achieve improved mental health without requiring a significant amount of expenditure.

Personal Wellbeing and Resilience

Having high levels of wellbeing and resilience have been shown to increase an individual's ability to withstand unforeseen challenges and reduce their risk of experiencing stress or other mental health issues. Our aim, therefore, was to provide individuals with insight into their personal wellbeing and resilience and the factors affecting it, and then to provide them with opportunities to engage in activities that would enable them to address the areas most important to them.

Individual Wellbeing Assessment: We had a strong need to gain insight into the pressures our employees were facing, as well as their broader psychological wellbeing and health behaviours, but we also understood the cynicism our people felt to surveys and that there was a strong case of 'survey-itis' and 'survey-fatigue'. Recognising this, we decided that we needed to ensure our employees felt that they each got something back for giving us insight into their feelings. We therefore partnered with organisational psychologists, Robertson Cooper Ltd, to transform their industry-leading stress and psychological wellbeing assessment ('ASSET') from being a traditional one-way survey into a two-way stress and resilience wellbeing assessment in which each individual employee receives a nine-page personalised report giving an overview of their general health and wellbeing, the major sources of pressure at work and practical solutions available to them to address any issues identified. In 2014/15, almost 4,300 employees completed the assessment and a target of 11,000 employees has been set for 2015/16.



Sample pages from our online wellbeing assessment report

Healthy Rewards and Benefits: The HR Rewards and Benefits programme has a range of health-related resources and interventions available to our employees, from discounted health assessments and gym memberships to cycle-to-work schemes and wellness vouchers. Recognising the positive effects that healthier behaviours can have on resilience, we worked to improve communication of those benefits which had a health-related element to them via mail campaigns, our online wellbeing portal and through the individual report employees receive from the wellbeing assessment.

Individual Resilience Workshops: We have begun the development and implementation of individual workshops related to stress management, resilience and other mental health tools (including Mindfulness and an introduction to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy). Within our Milton Keynes central office, these workshops have now been offered to all employees and a further roll-out is planned for other parts of the business.

Early Advice and Support

Although we aim to reduce the overall occurrence of preventable mental health issues, we understand that there will always be individuals who require further specialist guidance and support and that providing them (and, where appropriate, their line manager) with early advice and guidance can significantly reduce the likelihood of them being absent from work due to mental health issues.

Employee Assistance Programme (EAP): We worked with our HR Rewards and Benefits team to retender our EAP service in 2014 and ensured that effective and evidence-based mental health guidance was at the heart of our new service. Since its re-launch in September 2014, approximately 5% of our workforce have engaged the service and 65% of those using it have reported that the advice they received significantly helped them with the issue they were facing. We have continued to challenge our new service provider to show the positive impact that they are having on our employees, including through the use of clinically validated measures of psychological health and behaviour change.

Trauma Risk Management and Treatment: Many of the people working in our front-line roles are exposed to potentially traumatic incidents, including fatalities, suicides and verbal abuse, which may increase the risk of a post-traumatic stress disorder. Our traditional approach to this issue was to reactively 'parachute' psychologists and counsellors into the affected business area to do team de-briefs or one-on-one counselling sessions. However, a growing body of evidence now suggests that this approach is ineffective at best and may actually do more harm than good by over-medicalising the feelings and emotions of those involved in the incident. We recognised the clinical evidence outlining a three step approach to reducing risk of post-traumatic stress conditions, namely: a) build resilience in advance by highlighting to employees the things that they may realistically expect to encounter in their roles, b) avoiding over-medicalising and adopting an approach of 'watchful waiting' in which it is assumed that the majority of people will recover normally from the incident within four to six weeks, and c) providing evidence-based treatments (namely Trauma-Focussed Cognitive Behavioural Therapy [T-CBT] and Eye-Movement De-sensitisation and Re-processing [EMDR]) for those individuals who appear not to be recovering as normal. We trialled this approach with success in our Sussex Route and are now developing materials to roll this approach out nationally.

Manager Occupational Health Referrals: Our managers are able to make referrals to our national occupational health service for any health-related issue that is impacting on an individual's ability to deliver their duties or affecting their attendance at work. We have worked to increase the understanding that early referral is most effective and have seen a significant increase in the usage of our services over the past four years, with the number of referrals made due to psychological reasons increasing from 958 in 2011/12 to 1531 in 2014/15. Moving forwards, we will continue to deliver educational programmes that increase appropriate usage of our occupational health services and have plans to provide a more integrated approach to health referrals so that employees and managers experience a more seamless service.

Culture and Awareness

Underpinning all of the other activities we have been working on is the need to improve the cultural acceptance, awareness and understanding of mental health, stress and resilience within our organisation. We feel that without this important aspect, all other activities are likely to fail to achieve their true impact.

'Time to Change' Campaign: In February 2015, we held a series of coordinated, nationwide events focused on mental health to raise awareness of the fact that Network Rail had committed itself to the 'Time to Change' campaign and to make a clear statement that discrimination and stigma related to mental health was not acceptable in our organisation. Every Route and Function within our organisation held their own events using materials produced centrally, with many Managing Directors and Functional Directors leading conversations about mental health and their personal commitment to challenging stigma and discrimination. In our Milton Keynes central office, our Chief Executive Officer and our Head of Occupational Health and Wellbeing Strategy (below left image) held an event in the building auditorium talking with employees about mental health.



Mental Health Champions: Recognising that we will only achieve our cultural aims if people feel supported by those around them at work, we have recently begun a pilot of a Mental Health Champions concept with approximately 40 employees completing mental health awareness training. This will enable them to spot the signs or symptoms suggesting someone may need support, to be aware of the various mental health-related support services and resources available to employees and line managers, and to be able to have a 'sign-posting' conversation and suggest potentially helpful resources to be used. We are now developing training materials for Functions to use to develop their own Mental Health Champions.

Educational Resources: We have produced a range of engaging materials so that people can develop a better understanding of mental health, stress and resilience. We have developed a series of brief information guides (including work-related stress, dealing with traumatic incidents, and having conversations with others about mental health), educational podcasts of our Head of Occupational Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Professor Sir Cary Cooper discussing mental health and ways to address stress, short and engaging videos on topics such as what it is like for our employees who have experienced depression through to understanding the sources of work-related pressure. These materials are all available on our online [health and wellbeing portal](#) and, since its launch in April 2014, approximately 1700 people have visited the site each month.

Outcomes Achieved So Far

Although we are only in the early stages of our ten-year Occupational Health and Wellbeing Strategy, we have already begun to see positive signs that our approach and activities are leading to changes within our organisation.

Although making exact comparisons is difficult due to methodological issues, results from our online wellbeing assessment suggest that the proportion of employees feeling under excessive levels of pressure has reduced from 41.8% (n = 2600) to 22.4% (n = 4264), whilst the proportion of individuals with a high level of positive psychological wellbeing (which relates to both a strong sense of purpose and regular experience of positive emotions at work) had increased from 62.8% to 65.3% within the same time period.

Following our national 'Time to Change' campaign events, the membership of Network Rail's employee disability champions group ('Can Do') was doubled in one day and it is felt that this is likely due to individuals feeling more comfortable and willing to disclose experience of mental health issues. Similarly, a small follow-up survey (n = 100) found that the proportion of employees who felt strongly confident at being able to spot the signs and symptoms of mental health issues increased from 29.7% to 39.7%, the proportion who felt strongly comfortable discussing mental health with those at work increased from 27.4% to 44.6% and the proportion of employees who agreed that Network Rail cared for their health and wellbeing increased from 56.5% to 78.9%. Whilst it is acknowledged that this is only a small sample of employees, the improvements found are felt to show the potential impact that these cultural activities are likely to have as they continue to be rolled out.

Finally, Network Rail's strategic approach to improving mental health and wellbeing recently won a Highly Commended Award in the UK-wide Employee Benefits Award for the category of "Most Effective Stress Management and Mental Resilience Strategy". Network Rail is proud to have achieved this and believe that this recognition of its plans and approach so early in the overall strategic timeline is a positive reflection of the ambitious nature with which it is embedding health and wellbeing across the organisation.



Network Rail Occupational Health
and Wellbeing Strategy Team
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Best mental health resilience strategy

