

Go-Ahead takes steps to safeguard transport workers' mental health during COVID-19 pandemic

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Go-Ahead companies are setting out best practice for mental health in the transport industry, with wide-ranging initiatives to create a supportive working environment. This is in advance of mental health awareness week (10-16 May).

Southeastern is due to launch the railway industry's first ever Mental Health Charter this month, which sets out eight actions that can be taken by organisations to identify mental health hazards, address problems and train supportive managers.

Designed by Southeastern Mental Health Lead, Lee Woolcott-Ellis, the charter can be signed by any organisation associated with, or supporting, the railway industry in the UK.

At Southeastern, the number of colleagues seeking mental health support from first aiders rose by 146 per cent to 444 in 2020. The primary causes for intervention were anxiety, bereavement, loneliness, relationships and a reduction in household finances.

Govia Thameslink Railway (formed of Gatwick Express, Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern railways) recently won an Inside Out award for its mental health initiatives. This includes a network of more than 100 'Wellbeing Champions' and a volunteer support group for colleagues through COVID.

The company hosted 1,500 support sessions last year through its Employee Assistance Programme and other wellbeing initiatives. In 2020, GTR launched two pilot mental health hubs for customers and the community at Brighton and Eastbourne stations.

Meanwhile, Go-Ahead is training mental health champions at all 10 of its UK and Irish bus companies. They are trained to spot triggers, reassure people in distress and seek support.

Go-Ahead London – which operates a quarter of the capital's iconic red buses – is going one step further, setting a target to train every depot manager in mental health awareness.

Four-fifths of Go-Ahead's workforce is male, although initiatives are in place to encourage more women to consider careers in transport. Men are more likely than women to have lower levels of life satisfaction and are less likely to access mental health support.

Brighton & Hove and Metrobus was the first Go-Ahead bus company to launch the mental health first aider programme in 2020. A tenth of the workforce has since used the scheme, with the majority of calls regarding pandemic-related anxieties.

Sam Facey, Go-Ahead's Head of Safety, said: "The COVID-19 pandemic has been a particularly challenging period for transport workers who have kept essential services running throughout the year, irrespective of restrictions in other walks of life.

"At Go-Ahead, we want to make sure that everybody within our business is properly supported. There must be no stigma around mental health, and we want to make sure that everybody knows that help is at hand when they need it."

In 2021, Go-Ahead launched quarterly pulse surveys across all its bus companies to gather consistent and frequent data across more than 10,000 bus workers' wellbeing.

Photo credit: Go-Ahead