

Lee Woolcott-Ellis will receive a British Empire Medal (BEM) for services to Mental Health in Transport. He discusses establishing the Railway Mental Health Charter (RMHC) and his pride at being recognised

"I'm passionate about helping people"



Those working in the rail industry face shift patterns, challenging demands to strict deadlines, and exposure to traumatic events. With that in mind it probably doesn't come as a shock that sickness absence rates are more than double the national average, with a recent RSSB report finding that the average lost time rate in rail is 4.33 per cent.

The impact on the individuals is at the forefront of the industry coming together with the creation of the RMHC. More than 130 organisations of varying sizes, including Transport for London and the Office of Rail and Road, have signed up to the free framework to help promote, manage, and support workforce

mental wellbeing at work collectively as an industry.

"I didn't expect it to be so successful and it is really heartening that so many organisations have signed up to that commitment to look after their colleagues and share ideas and initiatives," explained Lee Woolcott-Ellis, who designed the charter nearly four years ago with RSSB. "When we developed it, we made it possible for any organisation small or large within the industry to sign up for free.

"It is delivered through key action steps, that have been formed to lead, advise, and underpin organisational efforts to create awareness, support positive mental health and provide access to support services whilst reducing stigma in the workplace. It's

just a great way of people helping people, getting access to like-minded individuals across the industry who are meeting the same challenges."

It continues to have a big impact on the rail industry. At Southeastern alone, where Lee works as a Mental Health Lead, the train operator developed a mental health advocacy programme which has been engaged with by more than 2,000 colleagues. Seventy colleagues have disclosed cases of historic abuse for the first time and are now receiving professional help. Last year Southeastern reported savings of over £700,000 due to colleagues engaging with the programme rather than being absent from work.

"I can put my hand on my heart and say we've helped reduce absence levels from the work that we've doing, and more importantly this work has been helping individuals who otherwise might have been struggling alone," added Lee. "But the onus is on the individual to come forward and ask for help."

Lee's determination is fuelled by experiences he suffered and a passion in helping people. For more than 30 years, he kept quiet about the abuse he had suffered as a child in the boarding school system in the 1970s, until one day in 2013 when it all became too much, and he decided to speak out and get help for the first time. He also decided to track down the offenders, with his bravery bringing some to justice for their crimes.

"I've got a complex PTSD diagnosis which comes from 10 years of extensive child abuse, something I bottled up for over 30 years which didn't make me a very nice, or well, person," he said. "Then one day I took the decision to ask for help and all of a sudden everything became a bit clearer.

"As things started to improve for me, I could see my former self in some of the people I was talking to, and it got me thinking about how many people are really struggling and don't know who to turn to or what to say. That's when I came up with the concept behind a mental health advocate programme. I found when I shared my story, more colleagues would approach me and open up. It has normalised the conversation around mental health.

"For me it's been a very cathartic process and

when I see everything that has been achieved it has really turned it all into something really quite remarkable and something I'm feeling quite proud about."

His efforts and bravery in sharing his story and work in improving mental health among colleagues haven't gone unnoticed, with Southeastern Managing Director Steve White describing him as a "very special person" making a "huge contribution to mental health on the railway", and the train operator's Head of Inclusion and Wellbeing Natalie Sparrow adding that he is a "pioneer in mental health" with his drive and inspiration "inspiring colleague engagement and increased resiliency".

Their praise came as it was announced that Lee was recognised in the New Year Honours List, receiving a BEM for services to Mental Health in Transport. As well as establishing the RMHC, he has also introduced a peer support programme to assist colleagues who have experienced a traumatic event, such as a workplace assault or suicide. Trauma Risk Management (TRiM) has engaged with more than 240 colleagues, with 110 going to a full trauma risk assessment.

"I was at work when my other half called me to say I had received a letter from His Majesty's service and was asking what I'd done," he said. "I was totally surprised when I opened it, and it is a privilege to have been recognised by the industry that I care so much about and that's been an important part of my life for many years. >>

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“It was a railway chaplain who said to me when I started to look at mental health advocacy that it is a vehicle, what a vehicle it has been for me”

Right: Lee Woolcott-Ellis was among the Southeastern colleagues recognised at the National Rail Awards in 2023.
Image: Southeastern



“I am genuinely honoured, and profoundly grateful to be acknowledged in this way and to see all the nice comments from people following the announcement. This recognition means a great deal to me, and it truly warms my heart to know that my efforts have been appreciated. It really validates who we are and what we have and will continue to do here. It was a railway chaplain who said to me when I started to look at mental health advocacy that it is a vehicle, what a vehicle it has been for me.”

Lee joined Southeastern in 1990 and has worked in a range of roles, including in operations, safety, and engineering, before becoming Mental Health Lead. As part of his role at the train operator he is a TRiM Coordinator, a welfare led process intended to assess the response of a colleague exposed to a traumatic or potentially traumatic incident. It originally began in the British Military and is designed to assist people

who have experienced a distressing event to deal with it productively.

“I have some fantastic colleagues who have joined me on the TRiM evolution journey, and we’ve evolved it to fit the railway within two years,” explained Lee. “For example, coming into force this year we have virtually eradicated all paper and we’re now completely digital which makes it easier to manage and a lot quicker to get colleagues into their assessments and get the process underway.”

“A project I’m starting this year is looking at a rail TRiM partnership which will be a sub group of the RMHC where we will look at engagement with all charter members within the industry that are doing TRiM and learning and sharing best practices.”

The recognition has been an opportunity for Lee to really take a moment to reflect on the achievements Southeastern and the wider sector have achieved, something he is keen to stress isn’t just down to him, but a fantastic team and an industry passionate to look after its colleagues.

“It has been a chance to sit back and take a moment of reflection on how well we have all done and how far personally I have come as well,” he said. “We’ve been working hard to push the mental health agenda for several years at Southeastern and I can say with confidence that we’ve reduced the stigma in the workplace. Colleagues will come and ask for help, and they feel safe and confident to do that.”

“I am immensely grateful for the unwavering support I have received over the past eight years and to those who have worked tirelessly to improve the mental wellbeing of colleagues in the rail industry. Together we have accomplished a great deal, yet there remains an important amount of work ahead of us to ensure that everyone is supported and in getting the message out that help is at hand if and when it is needed.”

Visit <https://www.rssb.co.uk/about-rssb/key-industry-topics/health-and-wellbeing/mental-wellbeing/railway-mental-health-charter-rmhc> for more details about the RMHC

