

# **Net zero construction push strains UK workforce mental health and well-being**

May 19 2025, by Simon Addyman and Jing Xu

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Credit: Pixabay from Pexels

The pressure of decarbonizing industrial sectors is weighing on workers.

The UK's Labor government seeks a low-carbon and homegrown energy

supply [by 2030](#). The scale and pace of this transformation is unprecedented in the country's power sector, and will involve building [twice as much](#) transmission infrastructure (pylons, cables, substations) in the next five years as was built over the last decade.

Much of the workforce will be drawn from the construction sector, which employs 2.3 million people. Construction forms the dominant supply chain to the 17 major infrastructure projects involved in [an overhaul](#) of the electricity grid that will connect new wind farms in the North Sea and northern Scotland to homes and businesses across Great Britain.

The workers "on the tools" who will carry out much of this transformation are struggling. The latest analysis from the Office for National Statistics suggests that the suicide risk of construction workers is [three times higher](#) than the male national average. Scholars of construction project management have identified a [toxic workplace culture](#) in the industry, citing aggressive market competition and demanding performance metrics.

This is a problem that is largely being ignored. When planners at the National Energy System Operator [assessed](#) the UK's capacity to build a clean power sector by 2030, they considered the absolute number of workers needed, the skills required and how employment is changing in the sector.

Their assessment failed to consider the broader implications for workforce mental health and well-being of such a quick and comprehensive upgrade—but it is people who are going through a rapid transition, not just infrastructure.

## **Going green, feeling blue**

Construction workers already endure long hours and stress due to [tight deadlines](#). A rapid transition to green power will substantially increase their workload, unless managed carefully.

[Our report](#), published July 2024, looked into well-being and suicide in the construction industry. We concluded that the UK government, major infrastructure owners such as National Grid and their supply chain partners who provide specialist design and construction services, must work together to solve this problem.

Major infrastructure owners offer [mental health services](#), such as confidential counseling, legal advice and financial guidance, to help their own employees manage personal or work-related issues. But most workers on the tools are not directly employed by these owners. Most are self-employed, or hired by construction firms, of which 99% are [small- and medium-sized enterprises](#).

More than 96% of [construction firms](#) have fewer than 15 employees. Smaller suppliers of specialist trade skills, like electrical and mechanical installation, have fewer employment protections and more compressed schedules, and are even less likely to have the capacity to provide these services.

Some infrastructure owners and big construction companies extend their health and well-being services to these smaller suppliers. However, in an industry that is dominated by competitive tendering, which favors suppliers that keep costs low, it is no surprise that uptake has been low.

Owners of infrastructure assets like electricity pylons and substations can drive workplace improvements by adopting procurement models that prioritize suppliers that are offering measures to improve [worker](#) well-being.

Research from one of us (Jing Xu) and fellow project management expert [Yanga Wu](#), has shown that the top-down prescriptive approach traditionally applied to health and safety in construction does not work for well-being. This requires a bottom-up approach that makes it easy for workers to tell managers what they are struggling with and what they think would help.

The construction sector also faces a shortage of workers and skills required for the green transition. The [industry training board](#) forecasts that the industry must attract the equivalent of 50,300 extra workers a year to meet expected levels of work over the next five years.

In the power sector, however, there is the additional complication of an aging workforce, as well as differences in employment conditions between permanent and contract staff. Key expertise is at risk of being lost with retirements. Older workers often face additional pressure, not only to meet performance targets but also to compensate for gaps in expertise, and all within a fast-paced environment.

To improve mental health and well-being among a diverse workforce requires engaging with workers directly and ensuring their voices are heard. This involves more than upgrading technical skills. Research to better understand how organizations can care for their workforce in the context of increasing pressures due to achieving net zero is also vital.

Further research and collaboration with infrastructure owners and major construction contractors could help manage the risks and provide valuable insights for other sectors that will need to follow suit, such as heating, transport and agriculture.

It is imperative to consider what a transition means: the technical transition of replacing outmoded technology, as well as the social transition, which prioritizes not only skills but workplace [mental health](#).

Without a focus on both policy and people, clean power will not be delivered.

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