

## People behind the process: the importance of wellbeing in construction disputes

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It's no secret that the UK construction industry continues to face serious mental health challenges across its workforce. According to industry data, more than 80% of workers report experiencing stress or anxiety, over a quarter have had suicidal thoughts and suicide rates in the sector remain significantly higher than in many other industries. For a sector contributing around 6–7% of the UK's GDP, the human cost is accompanied by a financial one too, with billions lost each year through absenteeism, presenteeism, reduced productivity and poor workmanship.

These statistics are certainly sobering, but encouragingly, the industry is beginning to respond in a more structured and meaningful way. Marc Preston's [Unlocking the Action Plan for Better Mental Health in UK Construction](#) published in December 2025 provides a clear roadmap for systemic change. I won't attempt to summarise the full paper, as it deserves to be read in its own right, but it proposes practical actions across four core areas: legislative and contracting changes; collaborative working; training and awareness; and culture shifts. The goal is straightforward: to reduce stress, burnout and suicide across the industry and create healthier, more supportive environments for everyone involved in delivering and commissioning construction projects.

Although written with the construction industry in mind, many of its themes will feel familiar to those working in other high-pressure sectors, particularly dispute resolution. For decades, construction and the legal profession have often shared a similar culture: long hours, high stakes, tight deadlines, and an unspoken expectation that resilience means simply "getting on with it". Productivity, billable hours and risk management have traditionally often taken precedence over conversations about wellbeing, so perhaps unsurprisingly, LawCare's *Life in the Law 2025* research found that nearly 60% of legal professionals reported poor mental wellbeing, with high levels of anxiety and burnout linked to long hours and sustained workload pressures.

These figures are difficult to ignore, but thankfully there are signs that a cultural shift is beginning to take shape, with initiatives emerging to tackle some of the issues at the heart of the problem. Something I touched on in an earlier [blog about protecting wellbeing in adjudication](#) is encouraging initiatives such as the Mindful Business Charter, alongside a growing movement of firms working collaboratively to create healthier practices for litigation and dispute resolution professionals. Together, these efforts are aiming to help challenge long-standing norms and reduce some of the unnecessary stress that too often accompanies the dispute resolution process.

### Pressure built into the process

Construction disputes rarely arise in calm circumstances. They tend to surface when projects are already under pressure, when programmes are delayed, budgets are tight, and working relationships may have started to fray. The result is a perfect storm of long hours, heightened emotion and constant urgency. And yet, behind every project and every dispute are people. Legal advisers, commercial teams, technical experts and dispute resolvers are expected to absorb vast amounts of information quickly while making decisions that can carry significant financial consequences. Over time, prolonged pressure like this can lead to stress, fatigue and reduced decision-making capacity. When disputes become complex or adversarial, it's easy to lose sight of this human element. Increasingly, however, it's clear that the people delivering this work are paying the price and why wellbeing is so important.

## **Wellbeing isn't a checklist**

I think one of the biggest misconceptions about mental health in professional environments is that there's a one-size-fits-all solution. Workplaces can often try to address wellbeing through universal programs or blanket policies, but mental health is deeply personal and shaped by individual circumstances, personalities, values and life stages. What helps one person feel supported and productive may feel ineffective or even stressful to someone else. The challenge isn't to eliminate pressure, as I think that would be unrealistic in high-responsibility fields such as dispute resolution or live construction delivery, but to manage pressure in a way that is sustainable. Younger professionals, in particular, are often more open about mental health, increasingly look for environments where wellbeing is valued and expect employers to provide meaningful, ongoing support. Firms that fail to respond may struggle to attract and retain talent. I think this reframing is important. Wellbeing is not something you "fix" once and move on from. It is an ongoing practice of adapting to changing demands and recognising when support or adjustment is needed.

## **Creating a healthier environment for managing disputes**

Construction disputes are often intense, fast-paced and high stakes, but the way they are managed can either amplify pressure or help to contain it. A healthier dispute environment does not mean reducing rigour or avoiding difficult conversations; instead, it means recognising that clear thinking and sound decision-making rely on people being able to work effectively under pressure. Against that backdrop, here are a few practical suggestions of healthier ways to work throughout the dispute resolution process:

**1. Promote professional, not personal, engagement** - Disagreements should remain focused on contractual and technical issues. Avoiding accusatory language can help reduce emotional strain for all parties and their advisers.

**2. Set realistic expectations around urgency** - While construction disputes often involve tight timelines, constant "firefighting" can be counterproductive. Clear communication and realistic timelines lower stress for everyone involved and allowing time for proper analysis can lead to clearer advice, fairer decisions and better outcomes for all.

**3. Share the load across teams** - Dispute preparation should never rest on a single individual. The strongest cases are often built through collaborative working between legal, commercial and technical teams, which not only improves the quality of the outcome but also reduces isolation and cognitive overload for those involved. Emerging technologies such as AI may also help by reducing certain workloads and allowing professionals to focus on higher-value thinking and collaboration, provided these tools are used to support people and are applied with appropriate validation and oversight.

**4. Use structured processes to reduce friction** - Clear protocols for document exchange, meetings, and communication minimise unnecessary confrontation and can help everyone stay

focused on resolution.

**5. Recognise the emotional labour involved** - Dispute resolvers, lawyers, experts and project leaders are frequently managing not just facts and law, but also client/party anxiety, reputational concerns, and high-stakes decision-making. Acknowledging this dimension can help foster mutual respect across the process. Setting boundaries around availability and reducing the “always on” culture do not weaken the dispute process; they strengthen it by enabling clearer thinking and better judgement.

**6. Normalising wellbeing conversations** - Leaders and senior practitioners setting the tone can help reduce stigma quickly. Introducing mental health awareness early, supported by mentoring and flexible working practices, helps create careers that are resilient rather than short-lived.

In short, even small changes in how we communicate, set deadlines and manage expectations can make a surprisingly significant difference, particularly within dispute resolution, where unnecessary pressure has often become normalised.

### **Support is growing across the UK**

Although I said I wouldn't attempt to relay the contents of the White Paper, I do think it's worth highlighting a number of UK organisations it references that are actively supporting mental health and wellbeing across the industry.

- **Mates in Mind** A construction-focused charity promoting mental health awareness and training across the built environment.
- **The Lighthouse Construction Industry Charity** delivers a 24/7 helpline and wellbeing support for construction workers and their families.
- **The Construction Industry Training Board (CITB)** integrates mental health awareness into training and skills development.
- **Mindflow** is a UK charity working to improve mental health conversations in construction through sport-based engagement.
- **LawCare** offers confidential emotional support tailored specifically to the legal community.

The construction and legal sectors are clearly increasingly recognising that sustainable performance depends on psychologically healthy professionals. Embedding them into everyday working life remains an ongoing challenge, but these initiatives and charities can provide essential support and signal real progress.

### **A growing movement for change**

As conversations around mental health become more open, I think there is a real opportunity to reshape dispute culture. It is sometimes easy to forget that at the centre of every dispute are human beings. However commercially framed or technically complex a matter may be, disputes can be emotionally demanding. The pressure of deadlines, the weight of responsibility and the cumulative impact of workload inevitably affect a person's ability to operate at their best. Resilience and a thick skin can certainly be valuable, and at times essential, in high-pressure environments such as adjudication, but resilience has limits. Just because one individual appears able to cope does not mean everyone can, or should be expected to. Construction disputes will always involve pressure, responsibility and complex decision-making, but that does not mean those involved should be expected to absorb unlimited stress as a condition of doing their jobs. Instead, it means recognising that better outcomes often come from healthier processes with clearer communication, realistic expectations, collaborative approaches where possible, and leadership that understands both the technical and emotional dimensions of the work. Protecting the wellbeing of those involved is therefore not only good practice, but essential if we want sustainable careers, healthier workplaces and better outcomes for the profession as a whole.



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