



First Bus – Mental Health First Aiders

WHO WE ARE

First Bus is the second largest regional bus operator in the UK, transporting nearly half a million passengers a day last year, despite pandemic restrictions. We deliver tailored network and fares offers to reflect the needs of local communities.

Key facts

- 465,000 passenger journeys a day in 2020/21, despite the pandemic
- Serves two-thirds of the UK's 15 largest conurbations
- Operates 5,000 buses

First Bus operates around a fifth of local bus services in the deregulated market outside London. We are the second largest regional bus operators in the UK with a fleet of approximately 5,000 buses.

We serve 40 of the UK's largest towns and cities including two-thirds of the UK's 15 largest conurbations, as seen on the map.

We employ 14,500 people across our operations. Since 2010 we have invested in more than 2,000 new buses across our fleet, helping us to improve punctuality, fuel and cost efficiency and reduce our environmental impact.

We are focused on First Bus becoming a leader in the transition to a low-carbon future for public transportation, and are committing to operate a zero-emission bus fleet by 2035, and do not plan to purchase any new diesel buses after December 2022.

In First Bus, we have committed to operating a wholly zero emission bus fleet across the UK by 2035 and will not purchase further diesel buses after December 2022.

OVERVIEW and OBJECTIVES

Mental Health First Aiders at First Bus

Our approach to supporting our First Bus colleagues with mental health began to take hold across the business in 2019. After becoming aware of some great practice from some of the FirstGroup rail companies, we sought to introduce Mental Health Champions, initially looking for one at each of our 13 Operating Companies (OpCos) to have a single point of contact for on the subject of mental health to signpost people to the most appropriate level of support.

Our sick absence statistics were showing, that along with musculoskeletal conditions, mental health issues were one of the biggest causes of people being off work sick and we needed to do something about it.

We began to promote health and wellbeing more generally following a review of our occupational health provision where some initial trends, supporting material and themes were being pushed out by them.

Our general approach to mental health support at First Bus was to begin by raising awareness and then look to build momentum from there.

APPROACH

The First Bus general approach was an organic one that evolved once momentum, awareness and interest started to build. With an increasing number of colleagues gaining an interest in the subject as we began to raise awareness and a network of Mental Health Champions for every OpCo was developed. More people were approaching the Learning & Development function explaining that they wanted to be Mental Health Champions and the demand began to increase. We encouraged line managers to come forward as Mental Health Champions and we were looking for people who had particular skills, a passion for mental health and supporting others.

Here is the list of requirements for our initial recruitment drive for Mental Health Champions:

- *Strong empathy and communication skills*
- *Good Listener*
- *Non-judgemental and able to act with integrity*
- *Ability to deal with confidential issues*
- *Effective people manager*
- *Able to demonstrate flexibility of working*
- *Able to build strong relationships with others without overstepping professional boundaries*
- *Has visibility within teams*
- *An interest in supporting others*

Our local HR teams began rolling out Mental Health Awareness workshops, holding engaging sessions talking with Line Managers and Supervisors about their role in supporting colleagues, how they could improve their knowledge and to consider some of the employment considerations and legislation in this area too.

As the interest increased and the momentum built around the subject, we then sought to expand the initial one-day 'Champion' course with the support of Mental Health England. To supplement our network of OpCo Champions we decided to use a recognised external course for our colleagues so that we could expand our mental health provision across more of our sites.

We therefore introduced a new course, for a maximum of 16 delegates, to train people to become First Bus Mental Health First Aiders (MHFAs). We decided to open up this training opportunity to any passionate and interested colleague, no matter what role they carried out in the organisation.

This training in MHFA was delivered by Mental Health England. Following more and more people becoming accredited, the MHFA network was then established.

As the momentum began to build, like other public transport providers we were hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite this being a potential barrier to progress, the support individuals needed for their mental health began to rise. With colleagues working on the frontline during a global pandemic, losing loved-ones, lockdowns, home-working, isolation and furlough it was clear that as a business we needed to do everything to maintain this support network. We encouraged our MHFAs to be proactive and make themselves available via video call where they could.

Given we were no longer able to send colleagues on a face-to-face course we worked with Mental Health England and settled on sending colleagues to their new one-day online course. This helped us to get people on courses more quickly and rapidly expand our MHFA network.

RESULTS

Overall, we are continuing to promote the conversations connected with mental health and this is linked to our aspirations on inclusion and wellbeing more broadly. Our approach encourages individuals to speak-up about their health issues and feel as though they can be open and honest about how they are feeling and bring their 'whole self' to work without fear of reprisal and actually feel supported by their colleagues and the wider organisation.

We now have 80% coverage of MHFA across our Depot sites and even more are coming forward across our support functions and we continue to push for more.

Our MHFAs are extremely proud and passionate about their subject area. Here are several quotes from a selection of them:

"I am hugely passionate about helping to create an environment that is open and safe for people to be themselves on good days and bad. I am also really keen on encouraging people to help themselves and find that inner strength."

"I became a MHFA because I love to be able to help others. Having some knowledge now on being able to support colleagues/friends or push them in the right direction of other support that may be needed will be a huge positive step in helping out anyone who may be in need. There is a huge stigma around mental health, and I would love to be on the team that's in the direction of changing this."

"Being a Mental Health First Aider always appealed to me as I wanted to be prepared for any situation or query. I wanted to understand the unique and different aspects to Mental Health and ensure I can help individuals appropriately with the correct knowledge around Mental Health, breaking down the different stigmas. As I develop in my working career, I want to ensure that Mental Health is always a factor that I can non-judgmentally support and overall, just say the right thing."

We facilitate an internal support network via our internal communications team, with MHFAs being able to access a private Yammer group so that they can discuss ideas, share local news stories, and generally provide support to one another. This is supplemented by a new Wellbeing Hub on the First Bus Employee Portal.

We hold good practice support calls with MFHA and ensure that we check-in with them on a fortnightly basis.

We have rolled out half-day Mental Health Workshops across all our OpCos, upskilling our line managers and we have also developed and promoted a Mental Health Awareness module on our learning management system First Bus University.

The roll-out of MFHA courses and our aim of continually increasing the number of MHFAs across our business goes alongside us supporting and promoting national days or events to promote mental health support and awareness. Examples of these are, "Brew Monday" in January, "Time to Talk Day" in February, "Mental Health Awareness Week" in May and "World Mental Health Day" in October. We have also collaborated with

our corporate charity partner, Action For Children to provide a toolkit for people that we specifically promoted during Children's Mental Health Week in February 2021.

CONCLUSION

In terms of our learnings, we have changed our process to appointing people to these critical Mental Health support roles. Initially we welcomed volunteers to apply but we have moved to slightly more rigorous application approach. We were finding in some instances that people were possibly applying for the wrong reasons or weren't getting the appropriate support or release from line managers. Now that there is generally more awareness, we now require a supportive reference and approval from line managers with individuals encouraged to put forward a more formal application with a personal statement for the role. Our local HR teams then verify the application with local management.

Moving to an online course for MHFAs has been a great success, enabling us to increase the numbers of trained people quickly and efficiently without having to travel to a central location for training.

Another learning is that with MHFA have never targeted a specific population of employees or job roles. We have MHFA who are Drivers, Supervisors, Staff Managers, HR Administrators, Engineering Managers, Heads of HR and even OpCo Managing Directors.

As a final point, we have found that colleagues in Engineering workshops and those on Night Shifts are the least represented across our OpCos and therefore we are undertaking a specific campaign to target them to put themselves forward for MHFA roles.

Moving forward, Health & Wellbeing is now one of the core pillars of our new First Bus people strategy as we focus on how we can better support our colleagues to destigmatise mental health conditions, provide support in the best way we can and strive to make First Bus a great place to work.