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# Advancing Mental Wellness Together.

NABS All Ears  
Community Consultation:  
Report and recommendations

Acknowledgements:

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- From Hook Strategy:**  
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**The entire NABS Team, Strategic Advisory Group and Board of Trustees**

**And everyone who gave their time, their perspectives, and their stories.**

As this report reminds us, sharing experiences of mental wellness is not easy, even in a safe space. We thank everyone for everything that they've contributed, and we commit to advancing mental wellness in our industry for the benefit of all.



Introduction

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to these mounting challenges, but we've identified some key areas where people throughout our community consistently face difficulties. Leaders, managers, and HR departments can focus on these areas to make a difference.

To the leaders in our industry community, we understand that it can be isolating at the top – a sentiment we heard repeatedly during our consultation. We believe that by coming together, sharing our concerns and experiences, and challenging one another, we can create cultures with mental wellness and inclusion at their core.

No leader in this industry is prepared to tackle these issues alone, and NABS is here to support you. However, we can only do so with your commitment to this shared cause. If you already support NABS, consider how you can actively engage with the work we do to support you and your organisation.

At NABS, what we've learned has already influenced our thinking for the coming years, and it will continue to shape our long-term strategic plans. In the short term, we've started tailoring our offer to address the common pressure points revealed by these findings. However, in the long term, we understand that we need to do more to solidify our position as the leading advocate for mental wellness in our community, advocating for systemic change alongside the practical support we provide.

We believe these are valuable insights for everyone in the industry, particularly at this crucial juncture in the changing workplace landscape. While these issues are challenging, there are steps we can all take to make things better and ensuring the least powerful voices are heard.

We hope you gain something from our findings. This marks the beginning of a conversation that we hope will contribute to advancing mental wellness in our industry, together.

Sue Todd, NABS CEO

Thank you for taking the time to read this report and for focusing on this important subject.

At NABS, our mission is to advance the mental wellness of the marketing, media, and advertising community. Understanding the experiences of our community is crucial, and progress relies on individuals at all levels working together to address what we've discovered.

Society's awareness of mental health has been steadily growing. However, we all face changes in our work and broader culture that can put a strain on our mental wellness.

In advertising, we're not alone in facing these issues, but many of them hit us hard, and early.

According to the Advertising Association's All In data, 33% of us are dealing with stress and anxiety that affects our work, with certain groups like early careers, LGBTQIA+, and disabled employees feeling these impacts disproportionately.

Our deep-dive revealed that individuals from minoritised ethnic communities are experiencing similar challenges. They feel unable to speak up and are encountering exclusionary behaviours, often as a result of well-meaning diversity initiatives not being authentically implemented, which is leading to a decline in mental wellness.

At NABS, demand for our services has increased by 66% over the last three years. People in this industry are seeking emotional support, and it's a challenge we all need to rise to.

# Methodology

# Executive Summary



We started with a strong base of knowledge, both from NABS’ own subject matter expertise, and from the All In Census.

We therefore focused on depth. We reached into every part of our community, dug deeper for better understanding and committed to advancing what we learnt.

Along the way we held 67 in-depth conversations, in groups and individually, with people in every part of our industry and at every stage of their careers.

We also conducted two pulse surveys, with a representative sample of 1,121 people.

This was supplemented with deep reviews of literature from the industry and beyond.



We found a community that was in the eye of the storm. Advertising is experiencing the same challenges around mental wellness and the world of work as other industries. However, these challenges are hitting us early, and hard. In total, 71% of respondents feel our industry needs to give more attention to mental wellness, and 35% still don’t feel they can talk openly about it.

Our work yielded **5 key findings:**

**1**  
**We have a lived experience gap, not a generation gap.**  
People are experiencing this industry differently, and this directly impacts their mental wellness. To address mental wellness, we need better mutual understanding.

**2**  
**There are broken steps on the management ladder.**  
A lot of the burden of mental wellness in the workplace is falling on managers who are often inexperienced and underprepared. To advance mental wellness, we need to support managers.



**3**  
**New ways of working need clear principles to succeed.**  
All decisions about how and where we work have unequal effects and unintended consequences. Decisions about work need to be based on understanding, and have clear principles.

**4**  
**The gap between policy and practice is becoming a chasm.**  
Our first-phase response to mental wellness has been to create new policies and initiatives. This has been necessary, but has created expectations which are not yet fulfilled.

**5**  
**We need to open up the mental wellness conversation.**  
We have started to destigmatise mental health, but those most likely to suffer are still those least likely to be heard. To design for everyone’s mental wellness, we need to ensure everyone is heard.

**NABS needs to raise its profile.**  
Many of NABS’ services are focused in the right areas, but those services are not visible enough, or embedded enough in the day-to-day. NABS can do more to advocate for its community.

**What NABS can do**  
NABS has to work to raise its profile, and to advocate more visibly in the industry around both the issues and some of the best practice and services available. NABS will focus on management as a key pressure point. It will also do more to connect the industry around universal challenges and emerging issues.

**What leaders can do**  
Leaders shouldn’t feel the pressure to be instantly perfect or mental health experts, but the actions of leaders in the workplace can make a big and positive difference to their teams’ mental wellness. Leaders can do more to ensure accountability, and to ensure the support is in place to close the gap between intention and real-life experience.

**What we can all do**  
The industry has made undeniable progress on mental wellness in the last decade, but we are still early in this journey. We believe the industry needs to put increased focus on ensuring that there is an ongoing dialogue that enables every voice in the industry around mental wellness to be heard, recognised, and addressed.

# How we ran this consultation process

## Principles

We built our initial hypotheses on many years of expertise in this space, and on the learnings from a major quantitative benchmark from the All In Census (19,000 respondents).

Our priority therefore was about depth - understanding why people were feeling how they are, what the consequences are, and what kind of interventions are likely to help.

**So, our consultation objectives were:**

- To reach into every part of our community.
- To dig deeper for better understanding.
- To advance what we learn.

## Data sources

**Qualitative:** We conducted 67 in-depth conversations. We went to all corners of the industry, speaking to everyone from early careers (0-3 years in the industry) to C Suite. Our sample took into consideration gender, age, neurodiversity, ethnicity and sexual orientation, disabilities and mental and physical conditions, to ensure that all lived experiences were represented. We spoke to those working in media agencies, media owners, creative agencies and adtechs from small start-ups to global companies. We also spoke to freelancers, consultants and those who were out of work.

**Research:** We also conducted extensive reviews of academic papers, industry research, and learnings from company people data where possible.

**Quantitative:** We built a representative sample of 1,121 respondents, checking important data breaks such as mental health conditions against the larger All In Census sample to ensure it was robust.

**Our survey representation included:**

56% female / 35% male / 9% non-binary / unstated

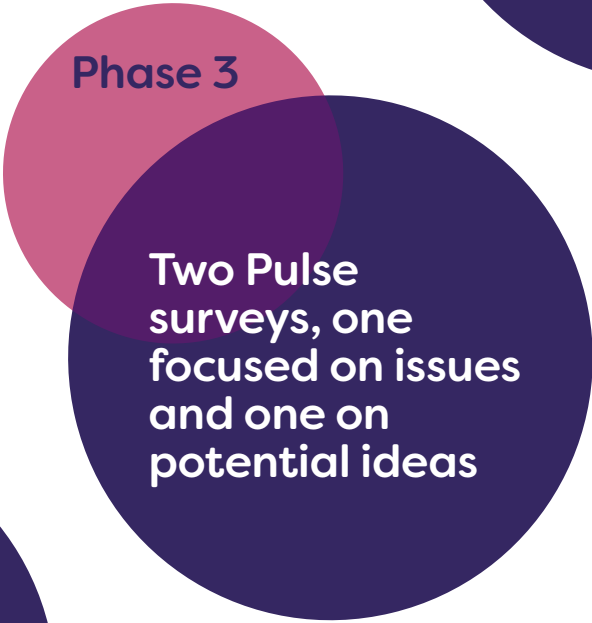
57% under 34, 43% over 34

**All career stages fully represented**

23% were from a minoritised ethnic group

21% identified as LGBTQIA+

52% located in London



# Key findings



The context:

# A community in the eye of a storm

**Modern work is changing fast across industries. This is happening against the background of rapid social and cultural changes. For many, the workplace experience is becoming increasingly anxious and stressful.**

As a collaboration-heavy, culturally-sensitive industry, waves of change hit us early, and we are not always well set up to manage them. This is creating pressure across our industry.

Mental health is a spectrum, and we can't expect to make challenges go away. But the experiences of our industry can make a big difference to how people feel.

We've made progress in some places , but we need to raise our ambitions and accelerate our progress, or we could see damage done which will be hard to repair.

## Managing change: engagement in the balance

Many of our respondents described an industry that at its best offers a chance to be authentic, collaborative and creative. However, this experience isn't yet available to everyone - whilst 64% of total respondents felt they could be themselves at work, for some groups this drops to 40% or below. Engagement is constantly in the balance.

Our respondents described an industry that struggles to deal with periods of high commercial and time pressures, and of organisational change. Moments like pitches and restructures lay bare the management

challenges of the industry, and create overload, stress and anxiety that is often not acknowledged.

**“We’ve just been through a restructure. There is huge pressure on the commercial pillar and people support has taken a back step.”**  
(middle manager)

We heard many stories where these moments of overload significantly affected people's ability to work and their enjoyment of life. In many cases the response was to leave their organisations, or to consider leaving the industry - even very early in their careers.

In a dynamic industry where 24% of junior staff members left their agencies in 2022 (Campaign), effective management of mental wellness is a key issue.

## How we support mental wellness is crucial

Feelings of stress, anxiety and burnout are not rare across the industry - they exist across all business types, and at all levels. In total, 71% of our sample agreed that mental wellness needs more focus in our industry, a finding that was consistent across our sample base.

**“Stress and burnout are normalised in our industry. It’s a cultural problem. It’s so endemic that it’s tricky to gauge when someone is tipping into real crisis because everyone is stressed. We need to stop glorifying extreme output and long hours.”**  
(middle manager)

Few expect the pressures of tight deadlines and commercial pressures to go away - it is how we collectively react to them that matters. We heard many positive stories about people who had experienced periods of extreme stress, or ongoing mental health conditions, but had been able to reach a better place with the support of their organisations.

However, often this supportive context is not present, or is not felt equally by everyone within the business. Still 23% of people in our community feel like mental wellness is not taken seriously within the industry, and 35% feel they would not be able to talk about their mental wellness challenges in the workplace. The danger here is that it is often those who most need support who feel least able to talk.

## Mental wellness as a connective thread

Our industry has already changed a lot. Increased focus on the diversity and mental wellness of people in our community has begun to change the industry's culture.

However, it is easy to overstate progress, and to underestimate the change still to come. Many of our respondents used either 'the industry they grew up in' or 'COVID' as their key anchors of comparison. In reality, comparing to the past is less relevant than beginning to shape a new idea of what the industry's future working culture needs to look like.

**“We need to be a bit more honest about what the job is about. It’s no longer just an ideas industry. It is much more complex.”**  
(senior leader)

Our consultation shows that while the journey to advance mental wellness in our industry has begun, progress is unevenly distributed. We have a lot further to go as the industry changes further.

There is also an opportunity to shift focus. There is a tendency to think about mental wellness as competitive with other workplace issues and with commercial priorities. Our research suggests that mental wellness is better thought of as a connecting thread, driving forward progress on multiple fronts, from DE&I to retention to growth.



Key Finding 1:

# We have a lived experience gap, not a generation gap

**It’s easy to pigeonhole mental wellness as a generational issue, in which different attitudes and behaviours are creating conflict. It’s not that simple.**

While it’s true that attitudes to mental wellness are changing, and expectations are rising, our research showed that generational differences were often overstated, with similar work goals and preoccupations emerging across generations. Mutual stereotyping is amplifying more superficial differences in language and behaviour.

On the other hand, the impact of other different lived experiences on attitudes to mental wellness seems to be underestimated or misunderstood. As the population of our community becomes more diverse, we need to be fully aware of the different pressures people experience, and avoid defaulting to generalisations based on our own experiences.

## The intersection of inclusion and mental wellness

The Advertising Association’s All In data illustrated for us at the outset that some dimensions of diversity have a close relation with mental wellness. LGBTQIA+, gender non-conforming and disabled members of our community all report higher levels of stress and anxiety than the general population. As we explored multiple dimensions of difference, we found some very different lived experiences of the industry.

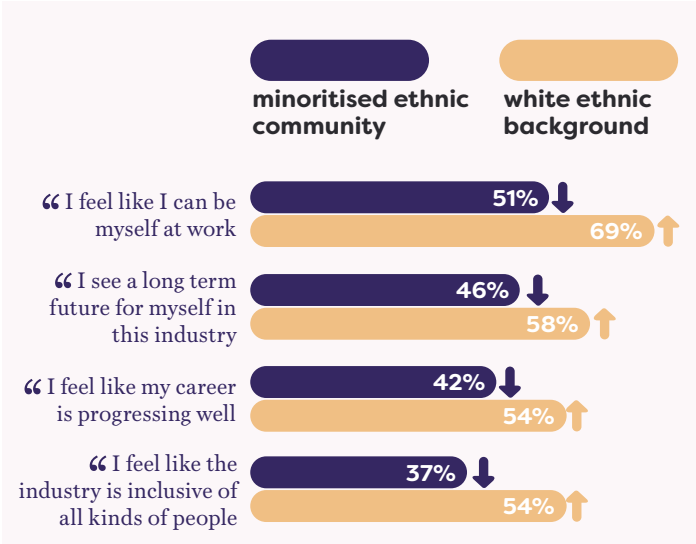
In particular, people share the mental dissonance created by their experiences of an

industry that is visibly hiring differently, but often struggling to create positive, inclusive paths for new entrants to the industry.

**“I’m often the ‘only’ in a room, diversity is still lacking despite what it says on the bottom of emails.”** (MEFA member)

If businesses want to reap the demonstrable benefits of a more diverse workforce, they need to ensure that these groups can feel comfortable to share their experiences. Unfortunately, these groups show some of the lowest levels of comfort in sharing their challenges, because of fears that it will affect their careers.

**“I was recruited as a diverse hire and asked to shake things up but they didn’t like my perspective and I didn’t feel heard. Ultimately, I was made redundant. I’m still processing this experience.”** (MEFA member)



## Mutual generational stereotyping

This industry is fairly young in profile, and deeply immersed in the attitudinal differences of generations. Mental wellness is a part of a picture of hyper-consciousness about generational shifts.

Because of greater visibility of mental health language in general discourse, managers and leaders will often assume that younger people, earlier in their careers, will be much more comfortable sharing their mental wellness challenges. In fact, this is often not the case.

**“I would worry about sharing mental health challenges at work and the possible impact on my career. I might talk about it with my friends but it’s different at work.”** (early career)

Our conversations with different groups were surprisingly consistent across generations. They described similar ambitions (personal ambition, the desire to do great work with a sense of purpose) and similar pressures (the need to set boundaries between home and work life.)

However, situations of broken dialogue between generations, manifested in frictional language and behaviours, were common. Mutual stereotyping each other’s intentions and behaviours was common, with over-sensitivity and excessive self-interest used as descriptors on both sides of the generation gap.

For example, many senior leaders expressed frustration at young people’s lack of appetite for office-based work; whilst many early careers expressed frustration at being able to secure face-to-face time with managers and leaders.

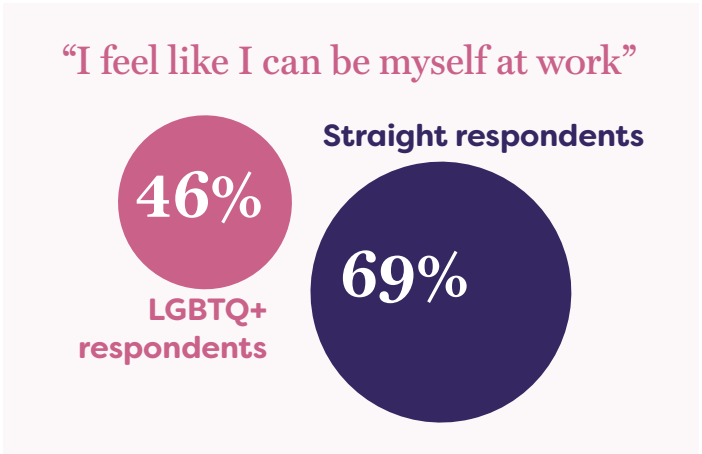
## Weakened cultural bonds

Marketing, media and advertising have historically revolved around shared cultures, often rooted in post-office alcohol. As office routines become disrupted, and alcohol-based socialising feels less relevant to many members of the industry and to working practices, many workplaces are struggling to find a cultural commonality to replace it.

**“There is an expectation to join in with work drinks. If you don’t join in, will you be left out? There should be more ways to connect, not everyone wants to drink.”** (early career)

The dimensions of difference that affect mental wellness – from generation, to ethnicity, to religion, to life stage, to family status, to health – can feel overwhelming to many managers and senior leaders. The disappearance of an apparently simply normative work and social culture can be frustrating, and lead to many defaulting to world views based on their personal experiences.

However, the best stories of positive mental wellness experience and of effective inclusion that we heard during our consultation were of workplaces with cultures of everyday openness and care. Organisations that make space to understand difference, while creating a shared culture, are more able to create mentally well workplaces for more of their employees.





Key Finding 2:

# Broken steps on the people management ladder

Careers in media and advertising accelerate quickly, and relatively inexperienced people can find themselves going through rapid transitions for which they may feel unprepared.

This is particularly pronounced for those who move into their first management positions, often unexpectedly and as a reward for their skills in areas quite different to people management.

This is happening at the same time that management itself is becoming more complex, covering an ever-increasing scope of practical and emotional responsibilities.

The stretch to live up to expectations can place intense mental wellness pressures on new managers. Their relative inexperience at management can indirectly contribute to mental wellness challenges for their teams.

## Learning needs at the key transition points

Every career transition point brings with it learning needs – whether it’s post-joining, the first step into management, transitions between disciplines or the first entry into senior management.

Thriving in these new roles to the best of their abilities requires people to learn both new technical skills, and new mindsets. In many cases, the industry has tended to rely on relatively informal forms of learning to help people manage these transitions.

There is a widespread anxiety that this approach is no longer working well – without as yet a sign of a new culture or investments around learning and development.

“Hybrid working is making it harder, you don’t learn on the job, it means you’re not picking up skills, so their confidence levels are low and contribution is impacted.”  
(senior leader)

“Learning by osmosis was lazy, we need to find a new intentional approach to training and development.”  
(senior leader)

In the consultation we repeatedly heard about the stresses people were experiencing at key transition points, feeling that they were unsure what was expected of them, or whether they had the skills required to succeed against a backdrop of overwhelm and conflicting demands. These skills come in multiple forms: technical skills, new mindsets, and people skills. Few felt they had all bases covered.

## Middle management is the key pinch point

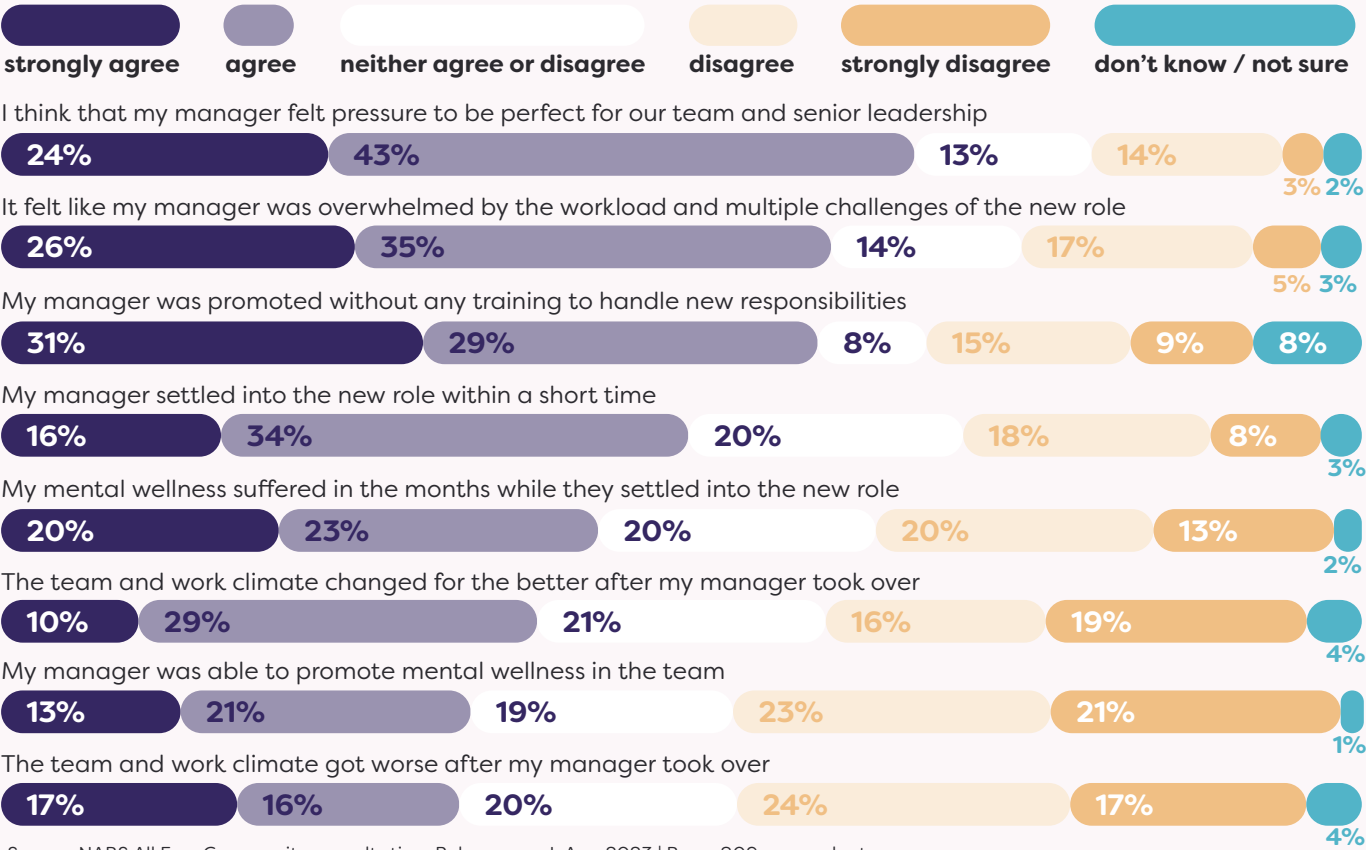
Almost every organisation we spoke to, and at every level, spoke about the importance of people management to mental wellness, and the challenges experienced both by new managers themselves, and by those that they manage.

The job of middle managers is becoming more pressurised, with the continual challenge of doing more with less. At the same time, managers are expected to be the key conduit of change into the organisation, while also being the first point of contact for people in

their teams experiencing mental wellness issues. In total, 42% of people experiencing mental wellness issues would take them to their line manager first, despite a widespread awareness that managers were not always prepared for their responsibilities.

This is a heavy load, often falling to inexperienced team members, alongside a significant workload. ▶

Thinking about your manager who you worked for in the last 3 years after they recently got promoted into the managing role, please let us know to which extent you agree with the following statements.



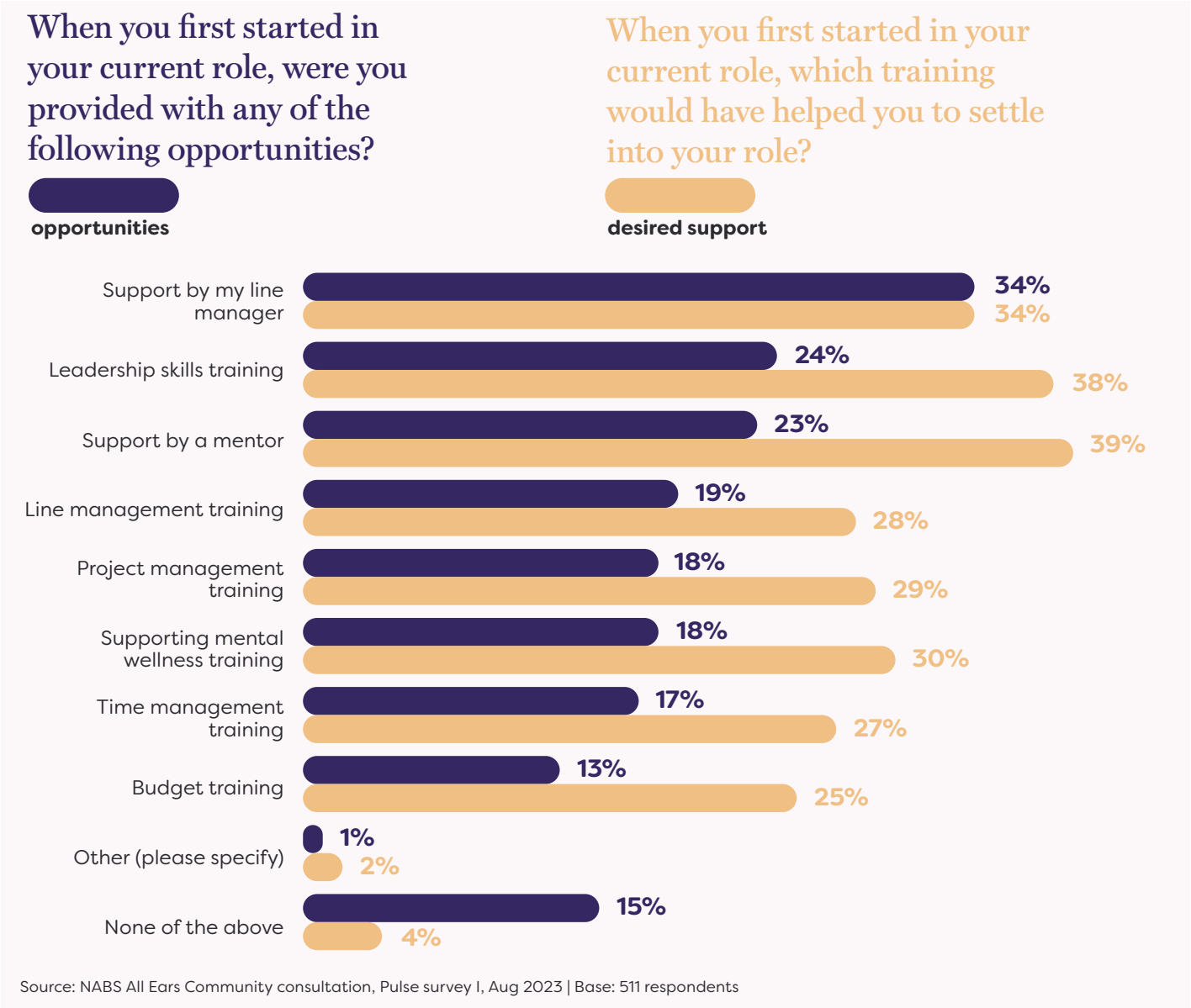
Source: NABS All Ears Community consultation, Pulse survey I, Aug 2023 | Base: 809 respondents

Key Finding 2:

“Line management is a lottery. Often people have been foisted into that role because they want a pay rise, but do they want to responsibility of managing people?”  
(middle manager)

“We over promote people to hold onto talent. Often managers just aren’t equipped with the life skills to manage. It’s a vicious circle that the industry as a whole should step away from.” (senior leader)

Less than quarter of newly appointed managers received leadership skills or line management training with the desire for support higher than what was provided



► Often managers are struggling with the burden of responsibility, and lack guidance on listening to the needs of their teams, while setting boundaries around their responsibilities and managing expectations.

The availability of formal or informal development support makes a big difference.

“My boss left. I came back from holiday and they said ‘She’s gone. You’re doing it.’ There was no professional development plan.”  
(middle manager)

The development support required is a mixture of practical management skills, and management mindsets. In particular, effective coaching mindsets were repeatedly cited as essential to the effectiveness and mental wellness of both the manager and the team.

At the same time, we need to recognise that this isn’t an easy skill for everyone to develop. Our consultation suggests that alongside more work developing coaching mindsets in managers, we also need more clarity about creating career paths that do not require people management.

“Maybe we need to spot people with a coaching mindset earlier in their career, not everyone is cut out for line management can’t there be alternative ways to progress?”  
(senior leader)

Key Finding 3:

# New ways of working need clear principles to succeed

**In the post-pandemic period, organisations are still grappling with the right way to combine the learnings from remote and hybrid working, with long-held beliefs about the benefits of in-person collaboration.**

A wide variety of solutions are in play, from full office return to fully remote, with some industry norms emerging around core days.

All of these decisions reveal differences and create pressures that impact mental wellness. In advertising, as in other industries, there’s no silver bullet solution. But those organisations that proceed with clear principles and strong communication seem to be turning this tension into a new opportunity.

## Virtual collaboration has side effects

Constant collaboration is now the norm. Organisational psychologist Rob Cross estimates that levels of required collaboration in the workplace have risen by 50% over the last ten years. Constant virtual collaboration has created pressure on the time available for reflection, one-to-one intimacy and productive work. This time pressure, alongside the mental load of increased screentime, create pressure on mental wellness.

“With hybrid you end up on back-to-back Teams calls. My manager is on Teams meetings all the time so it’s difficult to get time with her.”  
(early career)

“My calendar is just blocked with meetings I have no time to do the tasks” (middle manager)

Another impact of changes in ways of working during the pandemic which has pervaded since is the collapse in boundaries between home and work life.

For some experienced workers this can be a benefit, giving greater flexibility to reshape boundaries and routines around other demands and personal working styles. It can also be a significant challenge, in particular for people in their early careers, or people who are dealing with difficult life situations or culture switching.

“Working from home is seen as privilege, one that you should be grateful for, and you are expected to show your side of the deal and be flexible and contactable. It makes boundaries between work and home more tricky.” (MEFA member)

Both senior leaders and early careers respondents spoke about their efforts to create effective boundaries to help them switch between home and work life. The different ways in which they describe and apply this can lead to tension - but it is recognised as something that we need to solve to support mental wellness.

## New ways of working expose differences

The melting of shared assumptions and habits around ways of working has exposed differences of experience and attitude in the workplace, making it difficult to smoothly embed new practices that work for everyone.

The rise of more remote working has provided an invaluable opportunity to redress long-standing disadvantages in the workplace – in particular for some working parents, carers, neurodivergent employees and people with physical disabilities. Blunt ‘return to the office’ mandates create anxiety that the advances secured during these unusual times could easily be lost.

“Hybrid has changed things significantly for working parents. The old rules about presenteeism no longer apply. Also, flexibility is for everyone now not just mums and it’s no longer something you quietly agree with your line manager - you can be more transparent.”  
(senior leader)

Returning to the office also accentuates generational differences. For some senior leaders, remote represents a short-term aberration from the norm of office-based life. For a significant proportion of the early careers population, the pandemic period represents most of their experience in the industry. Middle managers, as on other topics, are sometimes stuck in the middle.

“When we first went remote there was a subset of senior people that thought there would be zero productivity. We have proved we can do it. But now there is an itchiness from the higher ups to get us back in the office more.”  
(middle manager)

## Setting clear intentions, principles and rationale

There are no definitive solutions or success cases that can define generalised best practice on new ways of working for the whole industry. We are still in a phase where most workplaces are looking for the best solutions that work for them, and trouble-shooting as they go.

Psychological research has consistently confirmed that shared team mental models and cognition are essential for effective performance (eg Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006), but it’s far from clear that either wholesale returns to traditional working practice, or total flexibility without constraints, are able to deliver the creative cohesions that workplaces in this industry need to succeed.

Whichever route businesses take, it is essential to be aware of the cultural re-contracting that is required around ways of working, because of the different perspectives across our community. Leaders also need to recognise that contracts are bi-directional, and that mandating a return to the office whilst senior leaders continue to work flexibly is unlikely to result in cultural harmony.

“There are things we’ve taken for granted about how and when people work, but not everyone has the same assumptions anymore. We need to accept that there’s a lot more explaining to do, about what is expected, and why.” (senior leader)

More than ever, businesses need to listen to all parts of the business, and external stakeholders, define explicit principles of behaviour, and communicate policies and practice with clear rationale, that effectively align what’s right for individuals with what’s right for the business.

18% of senior managers believe we have the tools to manage high workloads

27% believe that we have the right tools and practices to collaborate effectively



Key Finding 4:

# The gap between policy and practice is turning into a chasm

The first phase of our response as an industry has been to address our gaps around mental wellness with a wave of new policies and initiatives. Whilst many of these have been important and valued, they are creating an expectation that is not always fulfilled in practice.

The next phase of development to support mental wellness from our teams is to focus more deeply on the longevity and impact of our approaches - and to close the gap between the intention and business-as-usual.

In particular, good intentions are seen as being relegated to the back burner in periods of intense commercial pressure. This is also where the toughest mental wellness pressures are likely to occur.

## Early promises, sometimes unfulfilled

One of the great strengths of this industry is its ability to bring in new talent, with the promise of interesting work, the ability to express yourself and take responsibility rapidly. This is still true - but it can feel like a 'sink or swim' moment, often with relatively little formal support, reliant on osmosis rather than active development.

“I knew it would be overwhelming but it doesn't prepare you for it. Yes, it's fast paced but it's also the breadth of things you have to learn and the responsibility you are given - often we are dealing with big sums of money!” (early career)

This learning curve feels daunting for most entrants to the industry, bringing with it anxiety and uncertainty. For people from more traditional industry backgrounds, it is the sense of belonging and support that pulls you through.

If you've had a more atypical route into the industry, relevant support is often harder to find inside the business. External networks can play an invaluable role in providing relevant support but within many businesses there is a sense of promised, support, unfulfilled.

“I've seen diverse hires leaving because they don't feel supported. If you don't find your own support system it can be quite lonely.” (MEFA member)

“We are doing the work to recruit diverse talent, but not the work to protect people once they are inside our businesses.” (senior leader)

## Initiatives: overload and lack of follow-through

As new issues and expectations emerge around workplace culture and wellbeing, initiatives have proliferated to enable businesses to demonstrate action. In some cases, these initiatives have made significant personal impact on people's lives - shared parental leave is cited as a positive example - but there is an all-too-common perspective that more energy goes into the creation and launching of these initiatives than the practice of embedding them.

“We are great at celebrating success stories and hero policies. But all too often this is used as an excuse that we are doing well compared to other industries. Sometimes the day-to-day experience of my network doesn't match up to this.” (MEFA member)

Initiatives are seen as falling down in different areas, but in particular our respondents highlighted the interaction between mental wellness and inclusion initiatives and business-as-usual practices like performance reviews; and disjoints between the intentions and promises of senior leadership and the knowledge and capabilities of line managers.

There are many pockets of good practice across the industry, and good ideas from people looking to solve for emerging issues. However, sometimes there is an underlying competitive drive behind these initiatives, as part of the war for talent. However, when challenged, most senior leaders are happy to share best practice, and learn from peers.

“We're the only shitty industry that could take an issue like mental health and turn it into a competition!” (senior leader)

## Mental wellness theory vs. commercial practice

Whilst the launch of new policy and initiatives is visible and easy to track, the level of follow-through and impact is much harder to monitor. This means that the prominence of support, and of mental wellness culture, can tend to melt away in times of heightened commercial pressure.

“With mental wellbeing, I receive a lot of comms from HR on what support is available. But the reality is that, when you are involved in a high pressure client project (for example, a new business pitch), the behaviour of the teams running these projects does not reflect mental wellbeing considerations. So - the theory is there, but not the practice.” (middle manager)

In our process we spoke to two organisations in the industry who had undertaken independent evaluation of their policies and initiatives. In both cases, the organisations had over-estimated the impact of the work they had been doing, and top-quartile self-ratings misaligned with bottom-quartile employee ratings of their own mental wellness.

The end result of this dissonance is a degree of cynicism about the initiatives themselves that undermines them.

“We have mental health first aiders. It feels like a box ticking exercise. I'm not too sure what the process is. Have they had training? I don't know if I would use them.” (early career)

Most senior leaders we have spoken to are happy to invest time, and money, into programmes that create mental wellness, both as an end in itself and as a way of driving greater loyalty. However, it is the follow through of these ideas that would make the biggest difference.

Key Finding 5:

# We need to open up the mental wellness conversation

The industry has moved to a position where it is generally more comfortable talking about mental wellness, and accommodating for it.

Many leaders are willing to share their experiences openly, and this can be a great catalyst for progress.

The raised volume of the conversation can mean that we fail to notice those who are least present within it. Those who are suffering more severely right now, and those with lower legacy power status, are less likely to speak up.

We need to ensure that permission to speak, given in theory, is received in practice.

## Powerful people, with powerful stories

Across all kinds of media, tech and agency businesses, more of our community are able to cite inspiring, relatable senior leaders who are role-modelling positive behaviours. Their ability to show vulnerability on topics around mental wellness can help to destigmatise the topic and start more positive conversations.

50% of C-Suite or department heads still show concern about the impact that talking about mental health could have on their careers. But those who had crossed this barrier have often described a positive impact on themselves and on their teams from sharing their experiences and proactively looking to create change.

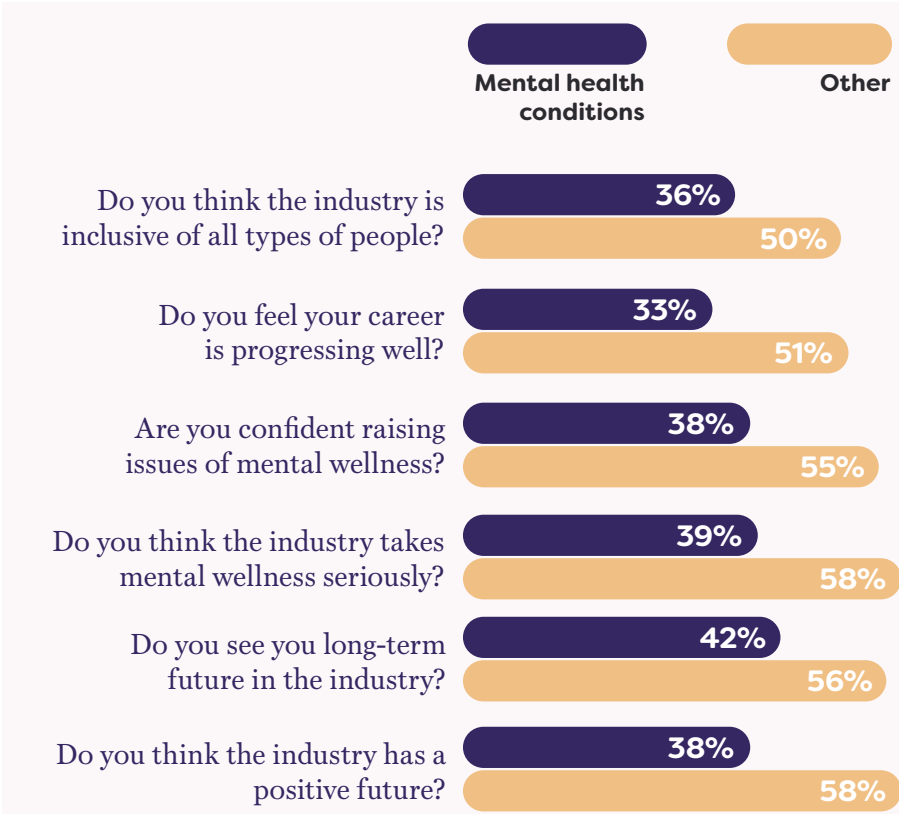
“I had some time off due to burnout after really intense pitching. I heard from so many people that they had been through something similar. It made me think why aren’t we talking about this. I’ve set up a group at the agency so that it’s more talked about.” (senior leader)

While this is a useful way to start conversations, this doesn’t ensure that everyone is equally able to speak up. Those who feel more insecure – early careers, minoritised groups, or those dealing with difficult life conditions – feel less able to talk. 39% of our early careers respondents were unlikely to share their experiences because of concern about what colleagues will think of them.

## Those suffering mental unwellness are less heard

There is wide spectrum of what we could broadly define as mental wellness, all the way from mild workplace stress, to chronic health conditions that affect every element of people’s lives. Better language to help describe this spectrum would help to ensure people are talking about the same issues.

One thing that is clear from our discussions is that it is those who have suffered, or are currently suffering, from mental health conditions that significantly affect their ability to work, that feel the least optimistic about the direction of the dialogue around mental wellness.



To have a meaningful dialogue, we need to ensure that the voices of people with mental and physical health conditions, trauma, or acute stress and anxiety are heard in the discussion – whilst recognising that people in those conditions may not feel willing or able to advocate on their own behalf.

## The ‘curb-cut effect’<sup>1</sup> – designing for everyone

Mental wellness is a spectrum, and we need everyone on that spectrum to feel like they can join the conversation and get the support they need.

The majority of us experience mental wellness issues at some point, and most want the workplace to evolve to be more supportive. But at any time, a significant minority are experiencing a much more direct impact, and they are likely to feel less empowered to talk.

In situations like this, we can learn from the so-called ‘curb cut’ effect, extensively examined particularly in American academic research around designing for inclusivity. It derives its name from the experience of disabled travellers in American cities, who over many years campaigned for more wheelchair-friendly design of the road system. Despite initial reluctance, cities who implemented the changes quickly found that they were helpful for a wide range of road users – runners, parents of young children, and delivery drivers.

In a similar way, if we start to redesign mental wellness interventions to actively create safe spaces for those who are suffering from more severe mental wellness challenges, we are very likely to create cultures which are also more benign and welcoming for the rest of our community.

<sup>1</sup> [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_curb\\_cut\\_effect](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_curb_cut_effect)



A stylized graphic of a speaker with sound waves. The speaker is represented by a yellow semi-circle on the left, and four concentric yellow arcs on the right represent the sound waves. The entire graphic is set against a background of overlapping yellow and orange circles.

# From learning to Action

From learning to action:

# What have we learnt about NABS?

## 1 NABS needs to be more visible

Those who know NABS value it highly, and see it as expert and impartial.

This consultation has however reinforced that there are far too many people who are unaware of NABS across the industry (in fact when we polled a random sample from the industry, only 29% understood who NABS were.)

## 3 NABS can fill the advocacy gap

It is hard for people to address mental wellness considerations when they don't feel heard, or feel represented in the conversation.

NABS has a natural role to play in using the body of expertise held by the team, as well as what we've learnt in this consultation, to advocate for people and to represent insights that can push us all forwards. This will help to better connect our community better in this area.

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## 2 NABS needs to be more embedded

When we test various ideas that might advance the mental wellness of our community, seven out of the top 10 most popular ideas were things that NABS already offers - but people were not aware of.

These services are not currently visible in their workplaces, or embedded in people management. This is an area where we can make rapid progress.

## 4 We need more accountability

Our people across the industry are asking for more accountability around mental wellness. Whilst NABS can help to support these efforts, this needs to be an area where we work together as an industry, and where individual businesses take the strain.

NABS does however have a convening power, and there is an opportunity to use this consultation as a springboard for more collaboration.

## Our Mission



## Our Offer



From learning to action:

# What can NABS do?

Our initial response to the findings will help shape and evolve NABS’ offer. We will take a phased, considered and consultative approach, as we do with the launch of all new NABS products and services. The below is only achievable if we make a collective investment into advancing the mental wellness of our industry.

## 1 Increase our visibility and relevance

The findings have shown that NABS is providing many of the individual-level services that our community feels are most useful to them, with a number of respondents in our pulse survey suggesting the following ideas as the most impactful actions NABS could take:

If NABS could do one thing to advance mental wellness, what would it be?	NABS’ current offer
A helpline to support individuals’ mental wellness	Our Advice Line supports individuals, managers, leaders and HR departments
Providing therapy to help people manage their challenges	We offer a therapy referral service, working with expert providers to deliver an average of seven sessions per person referred
Running workshops on mental wellness topics	<p>Our core workshops support individuals around topics to help develop confidence and resilience; last year we launched a workshop on inclusive leadership</p> <p>In 2023 we introduced Explore sessions. These are agile group coaching sessions which respond to emerging industry issues by creating safe spaces for collective exploration</p>

Our Support Team can be contacted on 0800 707 6607 during working hours. All other services can be accessed by visiting [nabs.org.uk](https://nabs.org.uk)

Currently, we are implementing seven out of 10 proposed ideas, indicating positive progress. However, almost two-thirds of respondents were not aware of NABS or the support NABS offers.

- To strengthen our efforts, we believe the following actions will be pivotal:
- Increasing awareness of NABS
  - Establishing more opportunities to engage with NABS
  - Creating and cascading more NABS originated expert content

In particular, doubling down on our efforts to strengthen relationships with our diversity partners across the industry. The consultation uncovered that those from minoritised groups don’t feel what we do at NABS resonates with their needs and experiences, so we will work to better engage with these groups through the above actions.

These strategies will bolster our existing initiatives and will also help us to do more in do more in the prevention and education space. We will also be able to target individuals who

may be slipping through the gaps, including early careers and those facing amplified mental health challenges. This includes marginalised groups, as highlighted by all All In’s recent data.

The rising demand for NABS’ services reinforces the industry’s need for us and aligns perfectly with our mission as a charity. However, we stand at a precipice where heightened awareness could potentially outpace our resources.

It is crucial that we continue to receive financial support to ensure we reach and support as many individuals as possible, which is why we believe in the importance of collective responsibility.

Donate to NABS to help us support the advertising and media family.

[nabs.org.uk/donate](https://nabs.org.uk/donate)

NABS

## 2 A special focus on management



Managers play a pivotal role in navigating the complexities of mental wellness within our industry. They serve as a vital bridge between leadership and the broader organisation. Managers bear the weight of translating strategy into operational reality and they are also expected to be delivering on cultural initiatives including enabling for a more inclusive working environment.

The expectations on managers are high. Yet training for managers is often overlooked. There is pressure to attain ‘perfection’ and while doing so, this will be impacting their own mental wellness. Early-career individuals are also viewing managers in a state of overwhelm.

Managers are an essential cog in the wheel of advancing mental wellness and they need the industry’s acknowledgement, credit and support. ►



From learning to action:

# What can NABS do?

► To support this culturally influential group, we propose a targeted programme focusing on two key audiences:

- Soon-to-be promoted or newly-promoted managers - catching and developing people in preparation for the role
- Established middle managers - people already in managerial roles who need to brush up on skills, building competence and confidence

The programme will instil essential skills and mindsets for mental wellness, equipping managers to lead through change and innovation in our ever-evolving industry and connect with others’ experiencing the same career challenges.

It will also complement our existing Inclusive Leader workshop which targets senior leaders.

**The programme will cover areas including:**

- Understanding mental wellness (with an intersectional lens) and facilitating conversations around it
- Self-awareness and self-care
- Setting boundaries and managing expectations
- Establishing psychological safety and inclusive practices
- Adopting a coaching approach
- Making informed decisions and taking accountability

Importantly, the programme will not address technical skills or HR procedures and processes. These areas are the responsibility of the employer and other industry bodies.

NABS’ existing services will be expanded to support this influential group, including manager-specific Explore sessions and specialist guidance available through our Support Team, providing managers with a vital sounding board.

## 3

### Turn up the dial: focussed support on shared pressure points

NABS knows that mental wellness is most vulnerable during times of life and career transitions. Much of the work we do supports this. Through our consultation we found that it is precisely during organisational change that support for mental wellness tends to be a lower priority.

To counter this, we propose turning the dial up on:

- Navigating change collaboratively through our existing Explore sessions and through new peer support and co-mentoring services.
- We’ll help more individuals explore how they respond and cope with points of change in life, from becoming a working parent to losing a parent; from pregnancy to menopause; from becoming a manager to redundancy.
- Ensuring people understand the breadth of resources available to them from NABS when key life transitions challenge their sense of mental wellness and ability to do their best at work is essential. We’ll be looking at the way we organise and promote our offer to make this more apparent and accessible for people.
- Fostering greater connection through our fundraising model. For example, this year we launched Walk and Talk for NABS, an opportunity for people to connect with NABS experts and colleagues from across our community whilst boosting mental wellness and raising vital funds for us. We’ll continue to test and explore other opportunities for connecting the dots between our mission and our income through this model.

## 4

### Create a leaders’ collective space

We recognise the pressure on senior leaders to develop working cultures that can address the challenges outlined in this report. This work is often difficult and time consuming. We will therefore create more confidential, non-competitive and supportive spaces for senior industry changemakers who are invested in driving the mental wellness agenda forward in collaboration with their peers. This will offer opportunities to explore challenges together, provide peer support and shared learnings on relevant topics and evolving industry needs.

With mental wellness as the connecting thread, not a competing issue, we can collectively review the latest business thinking as we respond to the macro environment.



## 5

### Explore a collaborative campaign for driving change

We believe there is real power in harnessing the collective influence and talent of our industry to drive systemic change across our community, and beyond. Our sector is capable of inspirational change through insight and creativity. NABS believes that by coming together and breaking down the barriers to open conversations about mental health, that we can lead the way for other sectors to follow. However, this work takes significant commitment and collaboration. We invite any organisation interested in coming together to work in such a way to get in touch.

Let’s make our industry one where every person can talk about mental health. Where permission and places to speak up are genuinely available to all. An industry where every voice matters.



From learning to action:

# What can you do?

Across our community, people are looking to leaders to advance the mental wellness issues highlighted in this report. And we know leaders are looking for direction on how to make a positive difference.

The issues are complex, and there's no single silver bullet that will solve them. This work is hard to do. None of us is fully ready to address mental wellness, or the broader changes in work, on our own. We are all learning together.

But we all have an opportunity, and a responsibility, to evolve this industry's approach to mental wellness at work. If we do, we will reap benefits in engagement, productivity, creativity, retention and inclusion. If we don't, we risk leaving people working without the supportive environment they need to thrive, which in turn, helps businesses to thrive.

This will be a long journey, and an evolving conversation. But here are six places leaders can start to advance mental wellness today:



## 1 Know where you stand

Every organisation is different, but the issues uncovered here will exist everywhere.

Whatever resources you have in terms of people data, employee feedback and exit interviews, get closer to it, and ensure you understand how these issues are playing out in your business.

Everyone has things to be proud of, and issues to resolve. Make sure you know where you stand. And make sure people know NABS is there to help.

## 2 Ensure every voice is heard

This is a conversation that needs every voice. Sharing your experiences is a great way to start, but make sure you create space to listen too.

Do you know what the experience of work is like for people who are living with chronic conditions? For people who are just starting out in their careers, or your middle manager, or freelancers? For people joining from different cultures or minoritised groups?

By expanding your circle, you'll learn things that help make the workplace better for everyone.

## 3 Check your policy/ practice gap

If you are just starting out on this journey, putting policies to support mental wellness in your business is essential, and NABS can help you to do that.

But if you do have policies and initiatives in place, don't assume the journey is done.

Check in to see how people understand the support available, whether it is embedded in the business day-to-day, and whether it is making an impact.

## 4 Keep an open mind

It's natural in the face of overwhelming complexity for leaders to fall back on our own experiences or assumptions about the world.

But in these times of rapid change in culture, within and beyond work, we all need to be open to new problems and solutions.

Openness from leaders, leadership teams, and their managers, is essential to creating and maintaining a mentally well workplace.

## 5 Collaborate, don't compete

This is a competitive and creative industry, in which our instinct is often to outshine our competitors.

When it comes to the mental wellness of our community, we are all on the same team. If you have approaches that are working, share them with your peers, and learn from their experiences too.

NABS will be creating more safe spaces for these conversations to happen. Please get involved.

## 6 Continue the conversation

This report has been designed to stimulate conversation about mental wellness in our community.

Please share it with your teams, and encourage them to tell you what they think.

If you need support having those conversations, or if you or your team would like to join industry-wide conversations on emerging topics, get in touch with us. We are here to advance these topics.

Email us at [allears@nabs.org.uk](mailto:allears@nabs.org.uk) or visit [nabs.org.uk/all-ears](https://nabs.org.uk/all-ears).



From learning to action:

# What can we do together?

Together, let's make our industry...

One where  
every person  
can talk  
about mental  
health

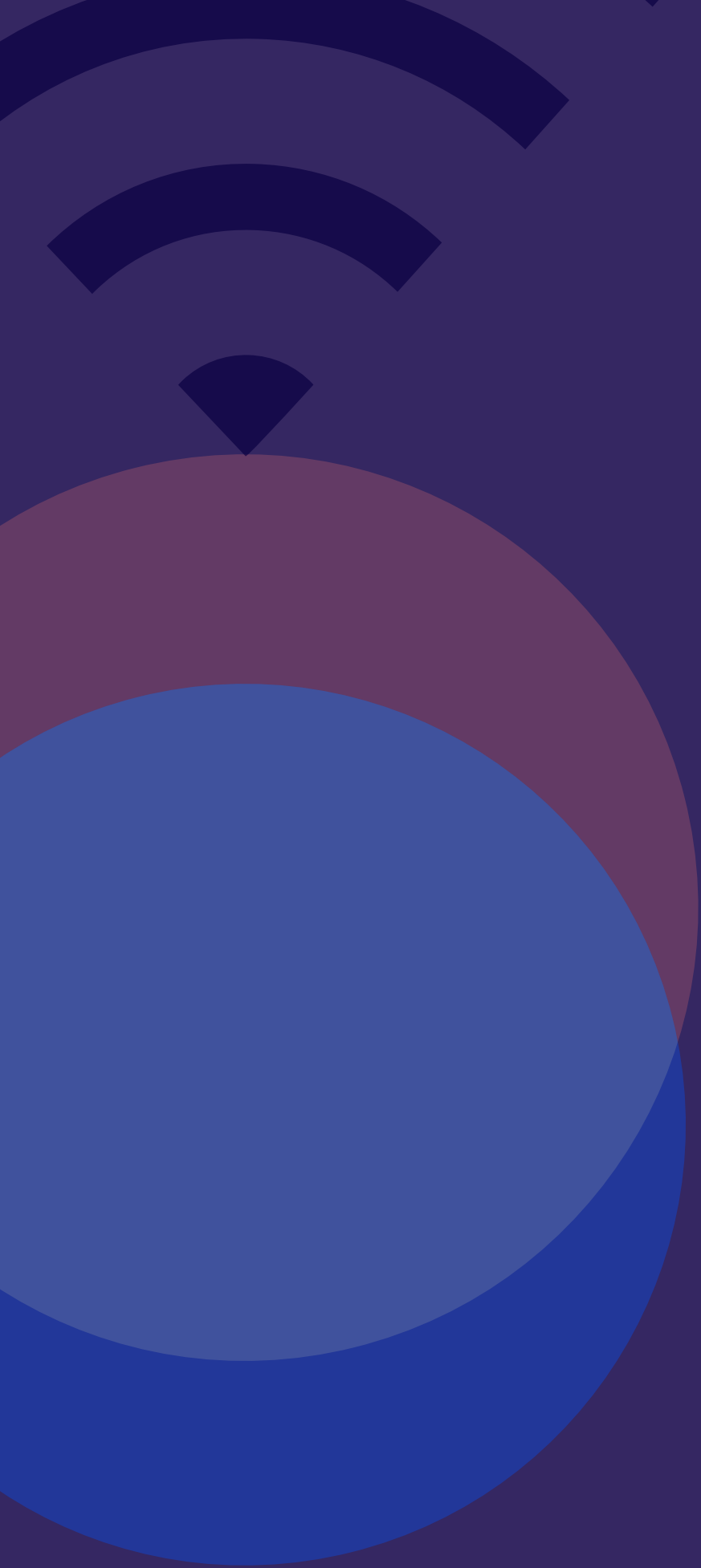
Where  
permission  
and spaces to  
speak up  
is felt by all

One where  
every voice  
matters

Our Support Team can be contacted on 0800 707 6607 during working hours.

All other services can be accessed by visiting [nabs.org.uk](https://nabs.org.uk)





nabs.org.uk



Charity registration number 1070556