



Guiding Principles for Emergency Response Volunteer Wellbeing



Volunteering to save lives



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The Mountain and Lowland Rescue representatives on the UKSAR Mental Health and Wellbeing Working Group were asked to consider how the six **Mental Health at Work Commitment Standards** could translate into a form that would be appropriate for volunteers.

It is important to recognise that each team in Mountain and Lowland Rescue in the UK is an organisation (and charity) in its own right and the national bodies have no governance responsibility over the day-to-day running of any team. However, the volunteer-led national bodies do exist to help share best practice and be engaged in issues that affect all teams (or groupings of teams). Involvement with UKSAR is one such area.

This document has been drawn up following a number of working drafts sent out to MR volunteer teams for comment and feedback. As volunteers, managing volunteer organisations, there is always a limit to the time and resources available and this means that wellbeing initiatives need to be embedded into existing culture and practice and not perceived to be an additional administrative burden.

We have attempted to translate the essence of the MHAW Commitment Standards in a form that will suit our volunteer organisations. The guiding principles are laid out on the first two pages, an example of a wellbeing work-plan follows, and the final page is a compressed listing of the principles that could be used as a poster.

We fully recognise that it is likely that each organisation may adopt a slightly different approach to suit their own circumstances. The key thing for us is that the conditions and culture for individual volunteers on the ground are the best they can be to help maintain and protect their mental health and wellbeing.

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Scottish Mountain Rescue



Volunteering to save lives

Jon White

Mountain Rescue England & Wales



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The vision is a volunteering experience where volunteer wellbeing and mental health is valued, promoted and protected; and where those who volunteer can participate fully, free from stigma and discrimination and can maintain psychological wellbeing while volunteering for an organisation that helps others in distress or need. Volunteering, in general, has beneficial effects on wellbeing and mental health, but we also recognise the potential stresses and strains that come with volunteering activities. Volunteers and their organisational leadership structures should work together to create a culture where everyone can speak out without fear of judgement, and for all volunteers to feel supported and know where to access support should they need it.

The principles are based on the well-established **Mental Health at Work (MHAW) Commitment Standards*** but written to be relevant for volunteer organisations.

The MHAW standards are:

- S1. Prioritise mental health in the workplace by developing and delivering a systematic programme of activity.
- S2. Proactively ensure work design and organisational culture drive positive mental health outcomes.
- S3. Promote an open culture around mental health.
- S4. Increase organisational confidence and capability.
- S5. Provide mental health tools and support.
- S6. Increase transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting.

We have mapped five guiding principles for volunteer wellbeing to the six standards as follows:

MHAW Standards	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Guiding Principles	P2	P2	P1/P3	P2	P4	P5

The five **guiding principles for volunteer wellbeing** are:

- P1. Promote an open culture around wellbeing and mental health.
- P2. Increase organisational confidence and capability on these issues.
- P3. Promote team (and family) actions to enhance wellbeing.
- P4. Signpost and bridge to relevant mental health learning, tools and support.
- P5. Increase transparency and accountability through reporting as and when appropriate.

These five principles offer a guide for volunteer organisations and those who volunteer, to grow and sustain a positive culture and practice around wellbeing.

A **Wellbeing Work-Plan **** may be a helpful way to help cross-check against the guiding principles and an example is attached at appendix 1.

Principle P1

Promote an open culture around wellbeing and mental health.

1. Positively support the way our volunteers think and act about mental health by increasing awareness and challenging stigma.
2. Positively empower volunteers to champion wellbeing and role model an open culture throughout the organisation.
3. Positively encourage, and create space for, open two-way conversations around mental health and wellbeing throughout all stages of volunteering for all operational and non-operational activities, including during

recruitment and retirement, training, meetings and through a positive wellbeing culture in the organisation and any supporting documentation.

Principle P2

Increase organisational confidence and capability on these issues.

1. Provide volunteers with the safest possible physical operating conditions, including the right training and the right equipment for role.
2. Encourage all volunteers to be suitably prepared and educated to have effective conversations about mental health with colleagues and make this clear during inductions for new volunteers, including where to signpost and bridge to support.
3. Aim for volunteer roles to be designed and supported in a way which maximises the wellbeing benefits of volunteering in addition to making a valued contribution to the organisation and the communities served.
4. Implement and communicate a **Wellbeing Work-Plan**** representing the views of volunteers in order to build organisational resilience in terms of wellbeing and mental health in a time span that is appropriate.

Principle P3

Promote volunteer (and family) actions to enhance wellbeing.

1. Actively support and encourage opportunities for all volunteers to increase mental health literacy and to learn about how to look after their own mental health in order to help maintain psychological wellbeing while volunteering in any capacity for an organisation that exists to help others in distress or need.
2. Create opportunities for volunteers and families to feed back when culture and conditions might contribute to poor mental health.
3. Consider how volunteer commitment (and the risk of an “always on call” culture) impacts on other aspects of their life such as work and family and when necessary make appropriate adjustments.

Principle P4

Signpost and bridge to relevant mental health learning, tools and support.

1. Raise awareness and understanding of the resources and support available through member/family regular updates and within training programmes.
2. Explore opportunities with the relevant calling or responsible agencies to gain access to relevant support, e.g. access to organisation 24/7 support programmes or rapid assessment for post-traumatic stress treatment.
3. Feedback any wellbeing and mental health training requirements or need for further support to the relevant leadership/management groups.

Principle P5

Increase transparency and accountability to members through reporting as and when appropriate.

1. For the organisation there may be a range of methods to achieve this principle and this should be considered as a part of the **Wellbeing Work-Plan** with methods and timings to suit each organisation.

NOTES:

* **Mental Health at Work Commitment Standards:** <https://bluelighttogether.org.uk/commitmentx/>

The **Wellbeing Work- Plan could be a plan within each organisation that sets out how progress with these principles is progressing, together with a locally agreed time span (example at Appendix 1).

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