



# Guiding Principles for Emergency Response Volunteer Wellbeing



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# Introduction

The Mountain and Lowland Rescue representatives on the UKSAR Mental Health and Wellbeing Work Group considered how the six [Mental Health at Work \(MHAW\) Commitment Standards](#) can be translated into a form that is more 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. 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 is the result of several working drafts sent out to MR/LR volunteer teams for comment and feedback. As volunteers, managing volunteer organisations, there is always a limit to the time and resources available. This means that wellbeing initiatives need to be embedded into existing culture and practice, and not perceived to be an additional administrative workload.

We have translated the essence of the MHAW Commitment Standards into a form that will suit our volunteer organisations. The guiding principles are set out on the first three pages, and an example of a wellbeing work plan follows.

We fully recognise that it is likely that each organisation may adopt a slightly different approach to suit their own circumstances. The guiding principles set out here can be used to form the basis of an organisation-specific approach, and the material found in the [Mental Health at Work toolkit: Supporting the mental health of your staff in the emergency services](#), will be a useful reference for background and case studies. The key thing 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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# Guiding Principles for Emergency Response Volunteer Wellbeing

Our vision is a volunteering experience where volunteer wellbeing and mental health is valued, promoted and protected. It is where our volunteers can participate fully, free from stigma and discrimination and 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. It is important 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.

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 in appendix 1.

# Guiding principles for volunteer wellbeing

## 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. This includes all operational and non-operational activities, including during recruitment and retirement, training, meetings. Additionally, 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. This should be made 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. Mental health knowledge can 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. 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. This should be considered as a part of the Wellbeing Work Plan with methods and timings to suit each organisation.

### \* The Wellbeing Work Plan

This 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 in Appendix 1).

