



Wellbeing and mental health in the emergency services

Our learning and key recommendations
for the sector – summary

The Blue Light Programme and beyond

Between 2015 and 2019, Mind delivered the Blue Light Programme, an ambitious programme aimed at reducing stigma, promoting wellbeing and improving mental health support for those working or volunteering in the ambulance, fire, police and search and rescue services.

Over four years, thousands of staff and volunteers across 999 services actively challenged stigma, learned more about mental health

and made positive changes for themselves and colleagues. We tested, delivered and learned from a range of interventions to improve mental health support, tackle stigma and increase workplace wellbeing.

The programme has had a significant impact on how positive staff and volunteers feel about mental health at work, in particular about how far their organisations encourage them to talk about mental health and support people with mental health problems.

We're now sharing our learning and recommendations, to help inform future wellbeing and mental health initiatives.

This is a summary version of our full Blue Light Programme legacy report. Find the full version on our website: mind.org.uk/bluelight

Front cover image credit: West Midlands Police



The Blue Light Programme in numbers

100+

emergency services and support organisations signed the Blue Light Time to Change pledge

3,000

Blue Light Champions registered – individuals taking positive action at work to raise awareness and challenge the way people think and act about mental health

9,000

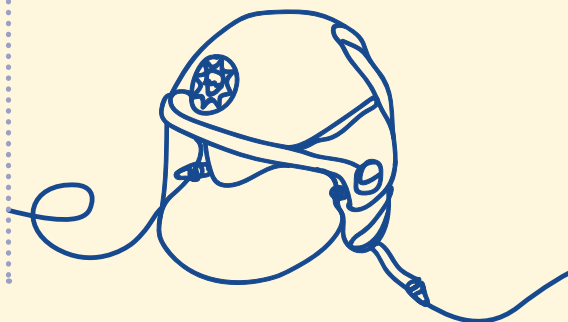
managers and pastoral staff trained in managing mental health

9,000+

calls to our Blue Light Infoline from emergency services staff, volunteers and their families

360,000+

info booklets distributed



Timeline

Year one: 2015-16

We developed the Blue Light Programme in collaboration with key stakeholders and blue light staff and volunteers, and evaluated our key activities after the first year.

Years two and three: 2016-18

We continued to develop and evaluate evidence-based activities, training and information, expanding the programme to cover Wales as well as England, and tailoring additional support for new recruits, 999 call handlers and emergency department staff.

Year four: 2018-19

We built on what we'd learned and introduced new initiatives, like working with local Minds to help people manage trauma. We shared our research and evaluation to ensure wellbeing continues to be a priority for blue light teams.

Mental health and the emergency services

In 2015, our research found that:

- Emergency services staff and volunteers experienced more mental health problems than the general workforce, but were less likely to take time off as a result.
- They were twice as likely to identify problems at work as the main cause of their mental health problems, compared with the general workforce.
- Almost nine in 10 (88 per cent) had experienced stress and poor mental health while working for blue light services.
- Almost three in four (71 per cent) said their organisation did not encourage them to talk about mental health, and nearly one in two thought their colleagues would be treated less favourably if they disclosed a mental health problem at work.

We are not super humans and we are just as prone to illness as anyone else if not more. We are no different from anyone else just because we work for the emergency services.

Paramedic, ambulance service

Things are changing for the better

In early 2019, our Mental Health in the Emergency Services Survey found that:

- Staff and volunteers are now far more likely to say their organisation:
 - encourages them to talk about mental health (64 per cent compared with 29 per cent)
 - supports people with mental health problems well (53 per cent versus 34 per cent).
- They're also much more likely to be aware of support available to help them manage their mental health (65 per cent versus 45 per cent).
- Perceptions are more positive among those who had involvement in the Blue Light Programme, compared with those who hadn't.





But poor mental health remains an issue

- The number of staff and volunteers reporting good or very good mental health has gone down since 2015, from 53 to 45 per cent.
- The number reporting poor mental health has increased from 14 to 21 per cent.
- Those with lived experience of mental health problems are less confident than colleagues that the culture in their organisation is improving (57 per cent confidence compared with 73 per cent of those without lived experience).
- Excessive workload continues to top the list of factors contributing to people feeling mentally unwell or stressed. But trauma is now cited by many as a source of pressure.

It's impossible to know whether these statistics reflect an increase in poor mental health, or show that more people are now better at recognising and reporting mental health problems.

Either way, emergency services face many challenges: funding reductions continue to be felt, while recent terrorist attacks and major incidents have thrown a spotlight on the traumatic situations faced by blue light teams. Supporting 999 teams' mental health matters.

The night shift, working with reduced staff. You sometimes haven't got time to get up from your desk to go for a comfort break or get a drink of water, even.

Call handler, fire service

Our learning from the Blue Light Programme

Tackling stigma

Stigmatising attitudes can stop staff and volunteers with mental health problems getting the support they need. A culture that normalises mental health conversations leads to more people accessing support, and creates opportunities for earlier intervention.

We promoted the Blue Light Time to Change England and Wales pledge, a tangible way for organisations to show their commitment to tackling

- stigma and promoting wellbeing. More than 100 emergency services, support charities and associations signed up.
- Embedding culture change takes time. After one year, only those closely involved in pledge activities reported an improvement in organisational culture. But after four years, the proportion of staff and volunteers who said their organisations encouraged openness had risen from 29 to 64 per cent.

Empowering staff to lead change

Having mental health champions at work to approach for informal support can help staff and volunteers better manage daily work pressures and learn about support.

We created the role of the Blue Light Champion – an employee or volunteer who takes positive action at work to raise awareness of and challenge the way people think and act about mental health. Almost 3,000

- people registered as Champions, receiving training and support.
- Being a mental health champion can have a significant positive impact on staff and volunteers, and having mental health champions of all ranks throughout the service helps reinforce the importance of wellbeing. Champions must be supported and empowered by their employers.

We are one big 999 family in the emergency services. Look out for your friends and colleagues and support them when they need it.

Winchman paramedic, search and rescue

Making support accessible

We received over 9,000 calls through our Blue Light Infoline, showing a need among staff, volunteers and their families for personalised information and support on a range of mental health issues and concerns.

We also produced and distributed a wide range of information products

- booklets, web pages and short films. We learned all these resources need to be well-promoted within workplaces, otherwise people don't know about or won't access them.

- We also developed and piloted targeted approaches to supporting two groups
 - new recruits and 999 call handlers.

Building resilience

Early in the programme, we piloted a resilience building course, delivered by local Minds. The aim was for attendees to build the tools and skills to cope better with stress, difficult emotions, and relationship and social pressures. Feedback was positive, but our evaluation showed no reliable improvements in wellbeing, resilience or social capital.

- We redeveloped the course and ran a second pilot. This time we saw significant improvements in wellbeing, resilience, and reduced likelihood of experiencing psychological distress, among participants in a new mixed-format course combining online and face-to-face sessions.


Establishing mental health networks

By working with similar organisations, services benefit from cost-effective integration, peer support, and easier sharing of learning and best practice.

In 2016-17 we piloted four Blue Light Mental Health Networks across England. We brought together emergency services in each area to promote wellbeing,

- tackle work-related mental health problems, and support staff and volunteers with their mental health.

- As well as costs sharing, benefits include staff and volunteers being able to build wider networks, access shared fitness facilities and tap into expert knowledge, advice and training.



Where we go from here

Recommendations for emergency services, and those who work with them

Invest in and promote workplace wellbeing and mental health initiatives, tailored to the unique needs of blue light staff and volunteers.

Enable strong policy frameworks that prioritise mental health and wellbeing, taking into account issues and pressures and how you intend to address them.

Adopt and promote the Thriving at Work core and enhanced mental health standards and regularly measure, review and act on feedback to ensure progress.

Promote and invest in mental health training and make this mandatory – including for managers and new recruits.

Create or strengthen networks of workplace mental health champions at all levels.

Research bodies can help by further developing the strong evidence base we and others have developed to enhance our knowledge of how to support the mental health of 999 teams.

Policymakers can help ensure the mental health of our 999 teams is a national priority by continuing to make resources available to increase workplace wellbeing.

What we'll do

We'll support emergency services, policy makers, professional bodies and charities through our workplace wellbeing initiatives.

Our network of local Minds will continue working with emergency services to provide workplace wellbeing and mental health information and support.

And we'll continue being there for anyone at work who wants support with their mental health and wellbeing, across England and Wales.

Find the full version of this report on our website:
mind.org.uk/bluelight

We're Mind, the mental health charity.

We won't give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

 @MindCharity

 mindforbettermentalhealth

We're a registered charity in England (no. 219830) and a registered company (no. 424348) in England and Wales.

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