

# Explore a career as a mental health officer

## What do MHOs do?

Mental health officers (MHOs) are social workers with additional training who have a unique role supporting and protecting people experiencing difficulties with their mental health. MHOs work for local authorities or health and social care partnerships, who have legal duties under mental health legislation.

The MHO role carries considerable autonomy and responsibility and involves working alongside medical and legal professionals to safeguard the health, safety, wellbeing and rights of people. This involves the assessment of individuals experiencing mental health difficulties who may need compulsory measures of care, treatment and in some cases, detention. Other duties include:

- protecting health, safety, welfare, finances and property
- safeguarding of rights and freedom
- duties to the court
- public protection in relation to mentally ill offenders.

➤ **This guide from the Scottish Government explains more about the MHO role ([tinyurl.com/sgov-mho-guide](https://www.tinyurl.com/sgov-mho-guide)).**



## Stephen Horsburgh tells us why he became an MHO

I was a young carer, so I missed a lot of schooling. I left school at 16 without any qualifications and worked for myself, setting up my own business. By my late thirties I injured my back and couldn't do that job anymore, so thought what am I going to do? I really wanted to do social work. If I had been given the chance when I was younger that's what I would have done. So, when I was 40, I decided to apply for social work, was accepted and gained my degree.

After working as a social worker for six years I applied for the MHO course. I had an interest in mental health work and felt it was an area I would enjoy working in. I loved the training at university and the two practice placements really helped me to apply what I was learning and to understand the legislation. The course was challenging but well worth the effort. I have never regretted that decision and am so glad I applied and am working as an MHO today.

## Rachel Sagdinc describes a typical day as an MHO with Highland Council

Every day is unique and with that comes the responsibility of prioritising, organising and being flexible enough to cope in a calm manner with what unfolds.

Being on duty (on call) for an MHO could mean applying for warrants in the court and liaising with police and the ambulance service to safely bring a person into hospital, to getting little jobs done while waiting for a phone to ring.

MHOs in Highland cover the geographical area of a small country. My car is the best mobile office in the world and getting a call out to beautiful locations around the Highlands on a nice day can be breathtaking. Standing in someone's garden in freezing temperatures and torrential rain for half the day so I can get them to a place of safety can also be breathtaking, for completely different reasons.

As an MHO you're meeting people on one of the worst days of their lives. You will find yourself making difficult decisions that can leave you feeling uncomfortable. However, people who have screamed and shouted (and called you names that cannot be repeated) will come to you later and thank you for saving their life, making everything you do worthwhile. That's what keeps the job alive for me – walking some very difficult steps beside some really special people.



## How can I become an MHO?

The training of MHOs reflects the high standard of expertise, legal knowledge and autonomy required to undertake the role. It ensures social workers gain and can demonstrate the applied knowledge, competences and values needed in meeting the complexity of the functions and duties of MHOs and particular skills in relation to mental health social work.

To become an MHO, you need to complete a Mental Health Officer Award postgraduate certificate (60 credits at SCQF level 11) which is recognised by the SSSC. This programme is available to social workers with a minimum of two years post qualifying experience who are currently employed by a local authority or health and social care partnership.

There are three programmes delivered by a university within a programme provider partnership:

- University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian University in partnership with Learning Network West ([tinyurl.com/uos-gcu-mho](https://tinyurl.com/uos-gcu-mho))
- Edinburgh University Partnership ([tinyurl.com/edin-mho](https://tinyurl.com/edin-mho))
- Robert Gordon University Partnership ([tinyurl.com/rgu-mho](https://tinyurl.com/rgu-mho)).

If you are interested in becoming an MHO, we suggest you speak to your employer to help you apply for the Mental Health Officer Award.

## For more information visit the SSSC website

- > Mental health officer web page: [www.sssc.uk.com/mho](https://www.sssc.uk.com/mho)
- > Mental Health Officer Award: [www.sssc.uk.com/mho-award](https://www.sssc.uk.com/mho-award)