Becoming a Non-Religious Chaplain in the Military

Information for potential candidates

About Non-Religious Chaplains

Non-Religious Chaplains (NRCs) work in parity alongside religious chaplains in the Army, Navy and Royal Air Force (RAF), offering both inclusive support to individuals of all religions and beliefs, and specific like-minded support where requested. They also deliver ceremonies including non-religious funerals and weddings, and civic services such as Remembrance.

Non-Religious Chaplaincy is not a secular wellbeing role. NRCs, like our religious colleagues, have deep and well-examined non-religious or humanist beliefs which shape their motivations and practice. Again, like our religious colleagues, we do not proselytise, seek to convert, or only support people with like-minded beliefs. Chaplaincy services strive to be inclusive and serve people of all religions and beliefs, and are staffed by practitioners who bring their own sincere and genuine beliefs to their work.

The endorsement process for military candidacy

The Army, Navy, and RAF all have different recruitment routes, differences in their approach to recruiting regular and reserve chaplains and NRCs, and there are differences in their processes. We recommend also approaching their respective recruitment teams to understand what is required of you.

For all three services candidates require a Certificate of Endorsement from their faith or belief Endorsing Authority (EA), which asks us to comment on an individual's suitability of the role of an NRC, including character, skills, knowledge, and experience. In doing this we also commit to maintaining a supportive and accountable relationship with the individual throughout their practice.

Candidates are assessed against the following broad criteria, set by the MOD, which must all be met:

1. Current accreditation as an NRPSN practitioner.
2. Pastoral care experience which we consider to be equitable to 2 years (RAF) or 3 years (Army and Navy) full time pastoral care employment. This can include a combination of voluntary or paid experience, and can take into account some prior relevant experience. *It is vital that individuals have significant experience of working in a multi-faith and belief team providing pastoral, chaplaincy, or spiritual care.*

3. Current accreditation as a Humanist Celebrant, including having undertaken the Civic Ceremonies CPD course. We will consider individuals who are experienced or accredited elsewhere, through the appropriate Humanist Ceremonies process.
4. Ability to appropriately champion the inclusion of non-religious and humanist beliefs in military provision, policies, and structure.
5. Ability to work constructively and collegially with, and bringing appropriate challenges to, religious colleagues.

In addition to these, candidates must be sufficiently 'professionally qualified', usually through suitable post-graduate study or equivalent.

The process of applying for a Certificate of Endorsement includes an application form, two relevant references, and two panel interviews to explore the above criteria.

If you are interested in exploring endorsement, please contact Clare Elcombe Webber, the Director of Humanist Care at Humanists UK and the NRPSN, at clare@humanists.uk

About Humanists UK and the NRPSN

The Non-Religious Pastoral Support Network (NRPSN) is an arms-length body of Humanists UK, established in 2016 in response to a recognised need for the provision of training, endorsement, quality assurance, and ongoing support for non-religious pastoral carers operating in institutions across the UK. The NRPSN is recognised by the National Health Service, His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), and the Ministry of Defence (MOD) as the Endorsing Authority for non-religious pastoral carers. The NRPSN is represented strategically on national bodies including an NRPSN practitioner serving as chair for the Network for Pastoral, Spiritual and Religious Care in Health, having representation at the NHS Chaplaincy Forum for Pastoral, Spiritual and Religious Care in Health, the UK Board of Healthcare Chaplains, and College of Healthcare Chaplains, and as Faith and Belief Advisors to HMPPS and the MOD.

The NRPSN has trained and accredited over 500 individuals to be non-religious pastoral carers. Our practitioners work and volunteer across a variety of institutions, with the majority within NHS hospitals, hospices, prisons, and in universities. Currently our membership includes heads of service in NHS Trusts, prisons, and universities. NRPSN practitioners currently fill more than 20 paid positions and over 120 voluntary positions in the UK, with another 60 practitioners actively seeking positions.

NRPSN membership is open to individuals who hold sincere and consistent non-religious beliefs, provided that those beliefs are worthy of respect in a democratic society, and who demonstrate the competencies set out in the NRPSN handbook and agree to abide by our code of conduct. While the NRPSN is an arms-length body of Humanists UK, membership is not limited to those who hold humanist beliefs.

Non-religious pastoral care follows a person-centred, needs-led approach, where practitioners 'walk alongside' those who they support, and seek to meet their emotional

or existential needs in that moment. This can include facilitating exploration of morality, purpose, and meaning, exploring autonomy and responsibility, finding psychological safety, or simply connecting through a genuine conversation with another human being. Throughout their training, ongoing professional development, supervision, and support, NRPSN practitioners are expected and supported to provide support and care to all who require it, regardless of any protected characteristic.

Many pastoral care interactions include elements of belief, or making sense of experiences, but many do not. NRPSN practitioners deliver both belief-based non-religious pastoral care, where the non-religious beliefs of the recipient are central, and general pastoral care in which beliefs are not central to the interaction. This general care involves active listening, true empathy and unconditional positive regard, and providing guidance and assistance without imposing agenda or direction.

Routes into the NRPSN

Membership of the NRPSN requires assertion of beliefs, accreditation of skills, and agreement to abide by our code of conduct.

Individuals must be able to articulate their cohesive, naturalistic, non-religious values and beliefs. These may align with humanism, atheism, agnosticism, or have no label. These beliefs should be serious, genuine, and sincerely held. Individuals would not be eligible for NRPSN membership if they hold religious or supernatural beliefs, if they are anti-religion or seek to 'convert' people to non-religious beliefs. Non-religious pastoral care or chaplaincy is also not a secular wellbeing or support service, it is delivered by practitioners with sincere non-religious beliefs, from within multi-faith and belief teams, even where the support given is not belief-orientated, and frequently those supported do not have the same beliefs as the practitioner.

Applicants to the NRPSN are assessed through one of the following three routes:

NRPSN induction training programme

Our weekend skills programme includes the following:

- Completion of an application form, exploring previous experience and qualifications, and a self-assessment of strengths, aptitudes, abilities, and skills; areas for development; and a statement of motivations and intentions in wishing to become a non-religious pastoral carer.
- Successful completion of a 60 minute interview with the NRPSN Lead Trainer, covering:
    - The candidate's non-religious worldview.
    - Their motivation, which is particularly important in order to identify those who may wish to proselytise, or who might be seeking to address their own needs through becoming a non-religious pastoral carer.
    - Their desire to work as part of diverse teams and provide support to a diverse range of people.

- Successful completion of a two-day induction course, through which their skills are explored and assessed. This course includes exploration of the non-religious model of pastoral care, observed role plays, ethical discussions, and the practical elements of non-religious pastoral care.
- Receipt of two acceptable references.

New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling's Existential and Humanist Pastoral Support course

NRPSN membership is available to individuals who complete any award (PGCert, PGDip or MA) within this course, and includes in addition to the course:

- Completion of an application form, which requires self-assessment of motivation and reason for seeking to become a non-religious pastoral carer.
- 60 minute interview with the NRPSN Lead Trainer or Manager, through which their skills and beliefs are explored.

This course was designed by the NRPSN and the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling in 2016 to meet the needs of individuals who are or wish to become paid professionals and senior practitioners. It includes training towards becoming a Humanist Celebrant in all types of ceremonies, including institutional ceremonies.

NRPSN membership benefits

Once we are satisfied that an individual meets the beliefs, skills, and aptitudes criteria, and has agreed to abide by the policies set out in the NRPSN Handbook, they will be accredited as an NRPSN practitioner. This gives them access to:

- Ongoing CPD. Recent sessions have included specific modules on healthcare or prison practice, baby loss, supporting individuals in liminal spaces, and issue-specific discussion groups.
- Peer support for particular sector practitioners such as those in prisons and healthcare roles.
- Specific support for individuals seeking paid roles.
- Supervision from a senior practitioner, where this is not provided by their institution.