Tracking PTE exposure and organisational responses: A guide on good practice system principles

Alexandra Howard

Director, Disasters and Public Health Emergencies

Natural Hazards Research Forum, June 2025

Presentation overview

1. **Guidance document overview**

   - Development of the guide

   - Background and drive

2. **Good practice principles**

   - Elements model

   - Principles and subprinciples

3. **Using the guide**

   - Plans and next steps

Development of the guidance document

Background and drive

→ As we know, fire and emergency service **workers are exposed to PTEs** throughout their roles

→ 'Answering the call survey' found **clear association between PTE & psychological distress and PTSD** (within the context of other organisational stressors)

→ Agencies are using a range of psychosocial risk management initiatives, including tracking systems. However, there was **little consensus** on best practice for tracking system.

→ **Call for improved tracking** of PTEs & organisational responses to help improve psychosocial safety

　　→ Also increasing recognition of need to identify, monitor, and address psychosocial hazards in the workplace within legislation

Development of the guide

Who:

→ Research project conducted in 2024 by Phoenix Australia – Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health.

→ Initiated by AFAC Mental Health and Wellbeing Group

→ Funded by Natural Hazards Research Australia

Aims:

→ To determine the best (good) practice for tracking workers' exposure to traumatic events (PTEs) in fire & emergency services; and organisational responses to workers' exposure to traumatic events

→ Findings to support fire & emergency service agencies to align their current practice for tracking cumulative exposure to PTEs against international best practice

Resource:
A guidance document for agencies to align their current approach to tracking PTE exposure against good practice

Development of the guide

Method:

→ Guided by project management committee of sector representatives

→ Literature review of available best practice systems (in grey and academic literature)

→ Environmental scan survey with 22 national and international emergency service agencies and high-risk organisations for current approaches, strengths, gaps

→ Three rounds of consensus building through workshop consultations with sector representatives

Outputs

→ Guidance document shaped in format identified during consultation

→ Final research report (available on NHRA website)

→ Dissemination activities (e.g., conference presentations, preparation of journal article, presenting at AFAC MW&W meetings)

Literature review

↓

Environmental scan with agencies

↓

Consultation consensus building

↓

Good practice principles
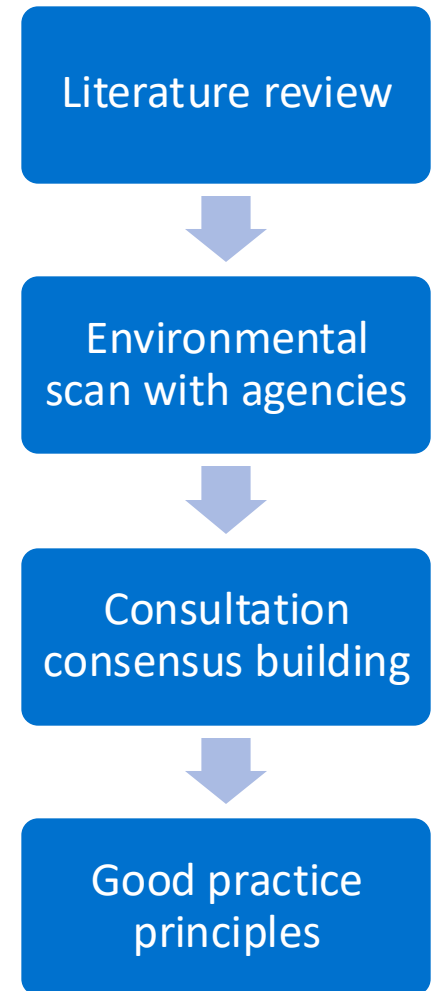
Guidance document available

Purpose:

→ Consider alignment of current systems against principles, update policies and procedures

→ Inform design of future tracking systems

→ Help guide decision-making on risk management systems

Target audience:

→ **Endorsed by AFAC MHWG in May 2025**

→ Wellbeing teams

→ Regional leadership teams (user friendly & demonstrate good practice)

→ Exec leadership and consultative bodies (support business cases & endorsement)

Good practice principles

Principles structure

Principles framework organised according to four-tiered structure, with levels of:

→ Elements to group similar principles

→ Principles

→ Subprinciples

→ Examples in practice

Each principle/subprinciple includes label, description, and rationale

Applying the principles and guide

Flexible application:

→ Principles designed to be used flexibly and tailored to suit different fire and emergency service agencies.

→ Many types of tracking systems used
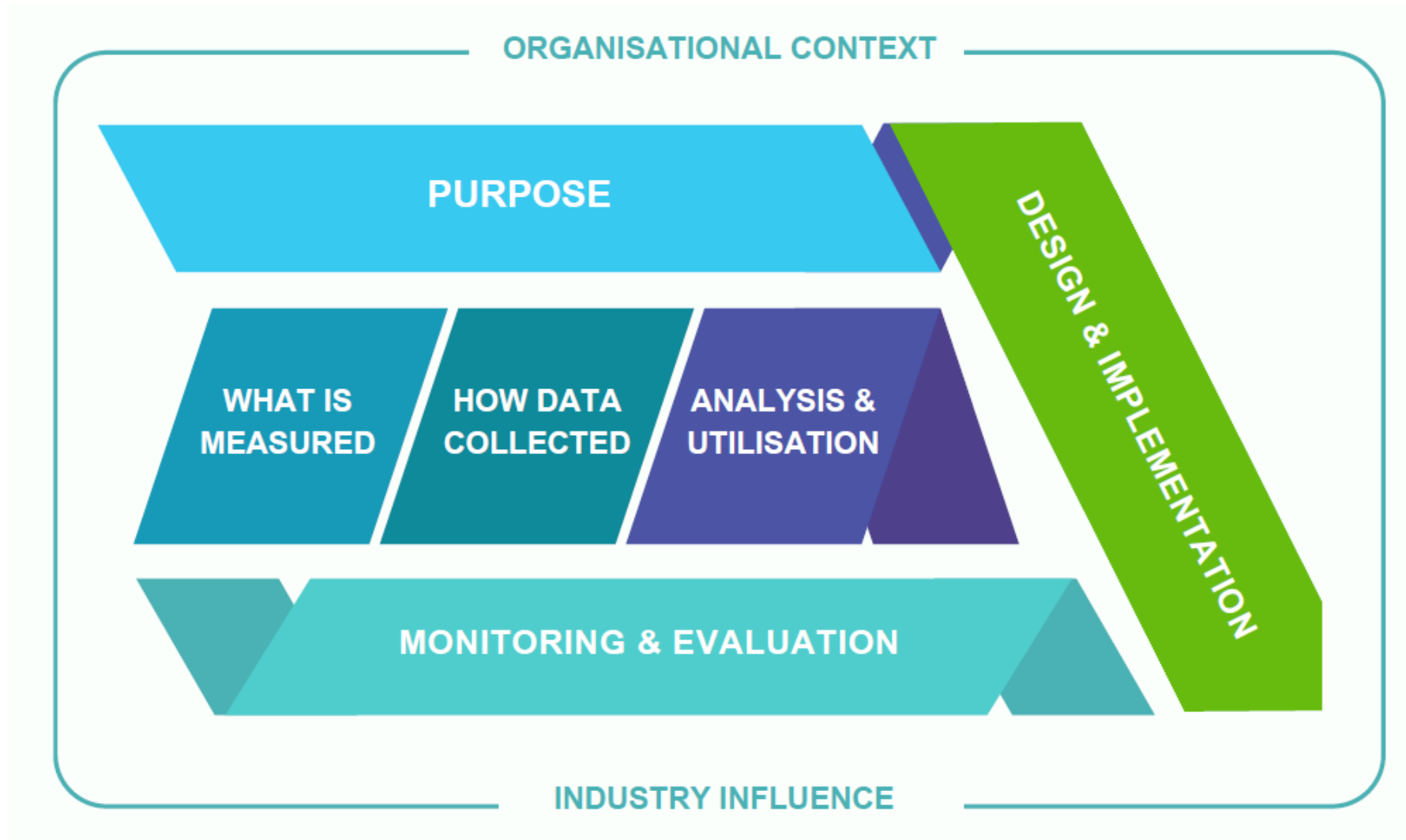
Non-prescriptive guidance:

→ Does not set mandatory standards or requirements.
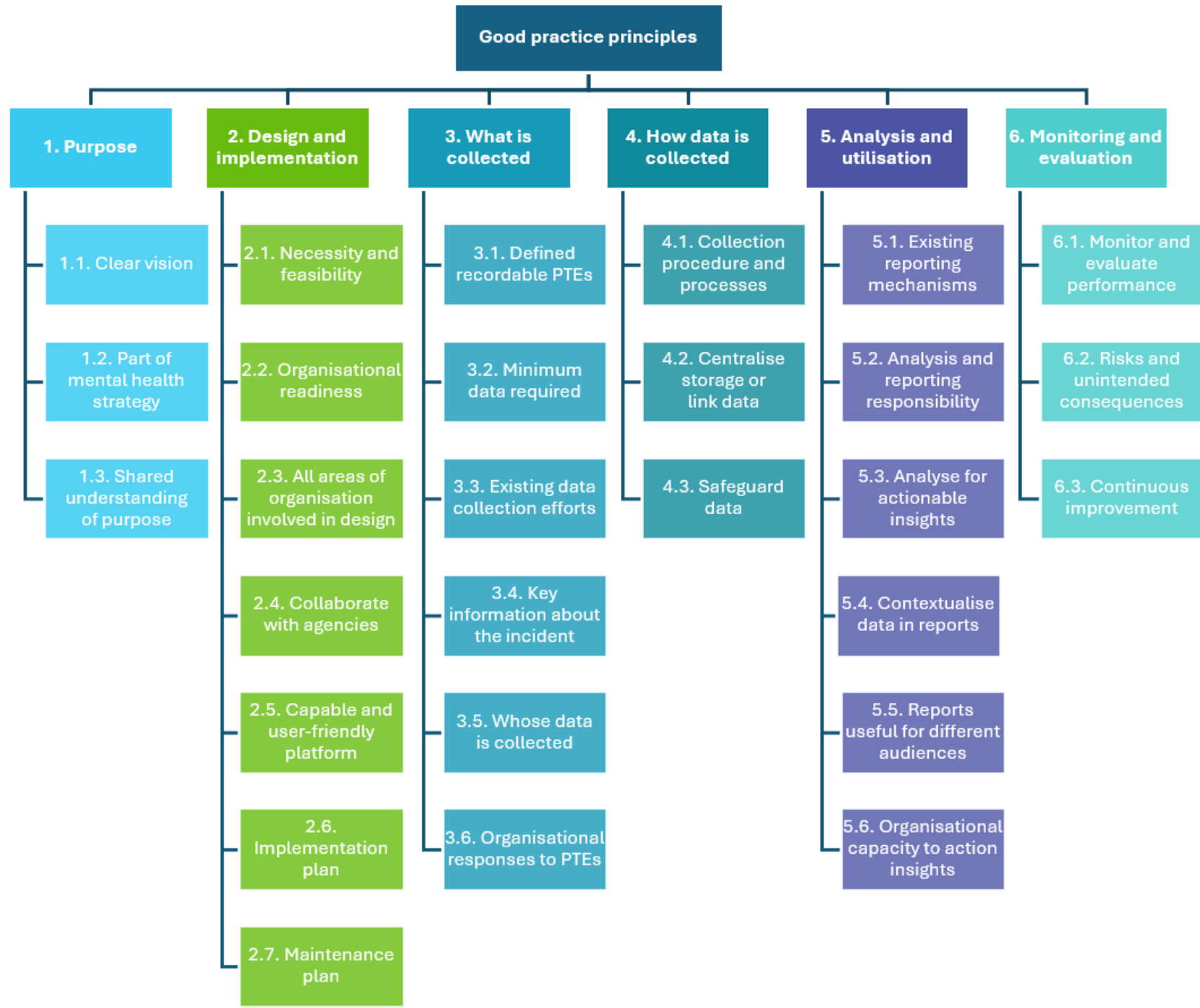
Supplementary resource:

→ Complements existing policies, guidance, and protocols

→ Not intended to replace

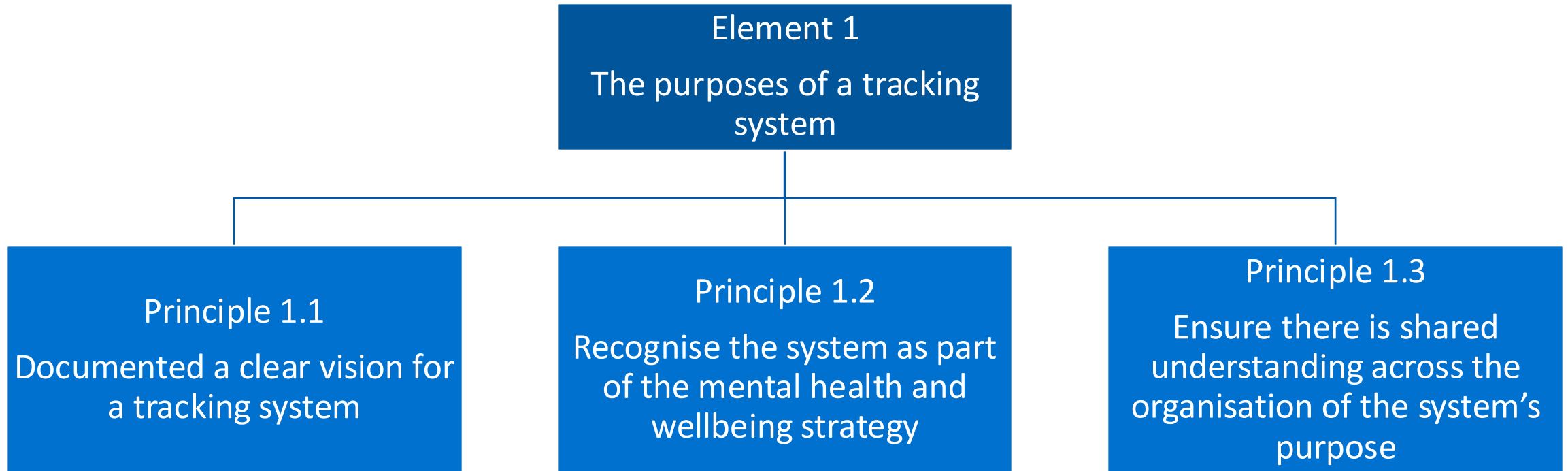# Elements model for tracking systems
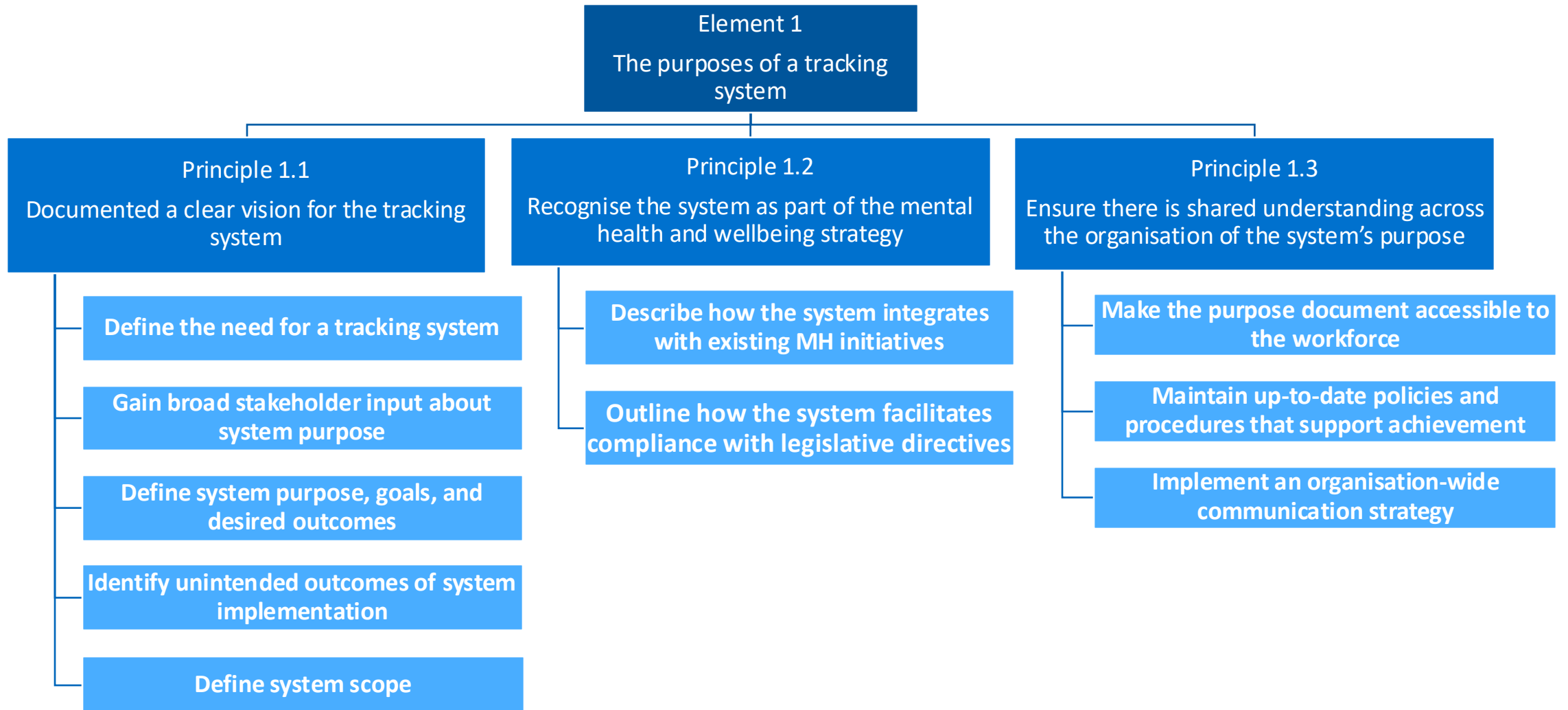
Good practice principles framework

Good practice principles

1. Purpose
- 1.1. Clear vision
- 1.2. Part of mental health strategy
- 1.3. Shared understanding of purpose

2. Design and implementation
- 2.1. Necessity and feasibility
- 2.2. Organisational readiness
- 2.3. All areas of organisation involved in design
- 2.4. Collaborate with agencies
- 2.5. Capable and user-friendly platform
- 2.6. Implementation plan
- 2.7. Maintenance plan

3. What is collected
- 3.1. Defined recordable PTEs
- 3.2. Minimum data required
- 3.3. Existing data collection efforts
- 3.4. Key information about the incident
- 3.5. Whose data is collected
- 3.6. Organisational responses to PTEs

4. How data is collected
- 4.1. Collection procedure and processes
- 4.2. Centralise storage or link data
- 4.3. Safeguard data

5. Analysis and utilisation
- 5.1. Existing reporting mechanisms
- 5.2. Analysis and reporting responsibility
- 5.3. Analyse for actionable insights
- 5.4. Contextualise data in reports
- 5.5. Reports useful for different audiences
- 5.6. Organisational capacity to action insights

6. Monitoring and evaluation
- 6.1. Monitor and evaluate performance
- 6.2. Risks and unintended consequences
- 6.3. Continuous improvement

Element 1 principles

PURPOSE

Element 1

The purposes of a tracking system

Principle 1.1

Documented a clear vision for a tracking system

Principle 1.2

Recognise the system as part of the mental health and wellbeing strategy

Principle 1.3

Ensure there is shared understanding across the organisation of the system's purpose

Element 1 principles & subprinciples (example)

Element 1

The purposes of a tracking system

Principle 1.1

Documented a clear vision for the tracking system

- Define the need for a tracking system
- Gain broad stakeholder input about system purpose
- Define system purpose, goals, and desired outcomes
- Identify unintended outcomes of system implementation
- Define system scope

Principle 1.2

Recognise the system as part of the mental health and wellbeing strategy

- Describe how the system integrates with existing MH initiatives
- Outline how the system facilitates compliance with legislative directives

Principle 1.3

Ensure there is shared understanding across the organisation of the system's purpose

- Make the purpose document accessible to the workforce
- Maintain up-to-date policies and procedures that support achievement
- Implement an organisation-wide communication strategy

Example of principle layout in the guide

Element 1:
The primary purpose of a tracking system

PURPOSE

The principles within Element 1 consider the motivations for having a tracking system, including the goals, purpose/s, and perceived benefits of the system.

Principle	Subprinciple	Examples of how the principle might be applied

1.1. Document a clear vision for a tracking system
 	
Define and document the overarching purpose, goals, and desired outcomes of tracking. Sub-purposes, goals, and desired outcomes can also be defined at the individual, manager/supervisor, regional, and organisational levels.
 	
Rationale: A clear vision across the organisation helps to focus tracking system design, implementation, and evaluation efforts.
	1.1.1. Define the need for a tracking system
	
	Define the problems and associated needs the organisation aims to address by implementing a tracking system.
	
	Rationale: Clear definitions help to focus system design, implementation, and utilisation efforts. Problems inform needs, which in turn inform the system purpose.
	
	1.1.2. Gain broad stakeholder input about the system's purpose
	
	Gain input from internal stakeholders (system users including staff, volunteers, managers/supervisors, and leaders) and external stakeholder (e.g. unions, similar agencies with systems) about the system's purpose, goals, and desired outcomes.
	
	Rationale: Involving stakeholders can enhance buy-in, and maximise alignment of purpose, goals, and outcomes with different stakeholder groups and overall organisational needs.
	
	1.1.3. Define the system's purpose, goals, and desired outcomes: overarching level, and at the levels of individual, manager/leader, regional, and organisation
	
	Define the overarching purpose, goals, and desired outcomes of the tracking system prior to its development and implementation (where possible). Operationalise these goals to assist with monitoring and evaluation (i.e. define indicators of system success).
	
	Organisations that want to adopt a level-specific focus may also define the purpose, goals, and desired outcomes at the:
	
	• *individual* level, giving consideration to role differences (e.g., career staff, volunteers, non-operational staff);
	
	• *management and leadership* level, ensuring alignment with role responsibilities;
	
	• *regional level*, considering local needs, resources, and patterns of PTE exposure; and/or
		• Examples of **problems** include using an outdated system (e.g., *"the current system is based on [system name] from 1988"*) and high prevalence of mental health problems (e.g., *"mental health is poor"*).
		
		• Informed by identified problems, **needs** may include updating the system, and taking additional steps to protect and promote worker mental health.
		
		• **Gather input from stakeholders** to understand their perspectives about the system's purpose, goals, and desired outcomes e.g., hold a workshop, develop an anonymous online voting system, discuss in individual supervision with workers.
		
		• **Overarching purposes** may include:
		
		  o raising organisational awareness/gathering intelligence (e.g., *"build awareness of the extent and impact of traumatic exposure on our staff"*; *"help identify risks and hazards"*) which may help understand patterns (e.g., *"examining trends between areas and over time"*) and inform responses (e.g., *"to enable proactive contact to those members who have been exposed to multiple PTEs, to set check-in's in an attempt to minimise or disrupt the potential of cumulative trauma"*);
		
		  o taking action (e.g., *"support a safer workplace"*; *"reduce the severity of injury and promote early intervention and proactive recovery"*);
		
		  o strategic planning (e.g., *"Guide expenditure and resource allocation"*; *"support training strategies"*); and

Using the guide in the industry

Potential use of the Guide

→ Review/benchmark current tracking system against the guide to identify areas for improvement

→ Use for selecting/developing and implementing new system or improving existing tracking system

→ Consider as part of whole of organisation approach to mental health and wellbeing

→ Engage support for considered approach to tracking across the agency

→ Help determine ownership of system or tracking system review process

→ Consider cross industry uses of guide e.g., common minimum data sets

→ Ultimately, invitation to test guidance in industry to help progress the field

NHRA's planned next steps to support Guide

To support agencies in using the Guide and principles, NHRA:

→ Will have final research report available on NHRA website

→ Will disseminate Guide through various channels

→ AFAC MHWG endorsed the Good Practice Principles

NRHA also considering other implementation initiatives in collaboration with industry:

→ Self-evaluation/audit tool

→ Practice note

→ Quick reference guide

The Phoenix Australia team also plan to publish a research article to encourage more research and expertise in this area internationally.

Discussion

Final questions

Contacts for the guide

Phoenix Australia: Alexandra Howard
ahowa@unimelb.edu.au

NHRA: Blythe McLennan
Blythe.McLennan@naturalhazards.com.au

AFAC: Karishma Kumar
karishma.kumar@afac.com.au

Optional information

About Phoenix Australia

Understanding trauma.

Renewing lives.

We are Australia's National Centre of Excellence in Posttraumatic Mental Health, and the internationally recognised experts in trauma-related mental health and wellbeing.

We build evidence and translate knowledge into action, such as improved treatment options and greater support for trauma-affected individuals, families and communities.

We are Phoenix Australia. We understand trauma and renew lives.

Project team and governance

Research project team

→ Alexandra Howard[1]
→ Dr David Pedder[1]
→ Dr Loretta Watson[1]
→ Anita Savic[1]
→ Dr Tracey Varker[1]
→ Kit Huckvale[2]
→ Nicole Sadler[1]

[1]Phoenix Australia
[2]Centre for Digital Transformation of Health

Project Management Committee

→ Dr Blythe McLennan, NHRA
→ Ethel Samalca, NHRA
→ Lara Wedding, NHRA

→ Karishma Kumar, AFAC
→ Melissa Peppin, AFAC
→ Oshani Liyanage, AFAC

→ Chris Hardman, FFM Vic
→ Suzanne Leckie, CFA
→ Rachel Treeby, VICSES
→ Jen Black, NSW RFS
→ Michelle Sopuch, NSW RFS
→ TJ Bauer, NSW RFS

Project phases

1. Best practice review

2. Develop good practice principles

3. Translation for practice

→ **Literature search** of best practice tracking systems & approaches

→ **Disseminate survey** with agency reps to identify current systems

→ *Thematic* **analysis** using defined criteria

→ **Drafting key principles**

→ **Consultation workshops** with ES agencies representatives & other experts to

   ■ assess agency needs

   ■ move toward best practice consensus

→ **Develop a brief guidance document** to assist in agencies in aligning their current approaches to tracking PTE exposure against good-practice

→ Other **dissemination** activities

Sector representation in methodology

Environmental scan survey

→ Completed detailed environ-scan survey with 22 responses (representation across the sector and Australia/international

→ Results provided indication on types of systems, what happens in practice, and key considerations (e.g., strengths, gaps)

SURVEY: SECTOR REPRESENTATION
- Fire (7)
- Police (4)
- Ambulance (1)
- Search and rescue (1)
- Multi-service (1)
- Other emergency services (4)
- Non-emergency services (3)
- Prefer not to say (1)

Workshop consultations

Reached agreement on set of principles (3 rounds)

→ **Workshop 1:** Nine academics, practitioners, and lived experience from the sector

→ **Workshop 2:** Twelve members from AFAC MHWG as industry representatives (e.g., fire, rescue, life saving agencies)

→ Updated principles review by project management committee (includes industry reps)

Element 2 principles

Element 2

Design and implementation of the system

Principle 2.1	Principle 2.2	Principle 2.3	Principle 2.4	Principle 2.5	Principle 2.6	Principle 2.7
Assess necessity + feasibility of implementing a system	Assess org readiness for a tracking system	Involve reps from all levels and areas of org	Collab with agencies across sector on design & develop't	Select software with required capability and user-friendly	Develop and document an implementation plan	Develop and implement a system maintenance plan

Element 3 principles

WHAT IS MEASURED

Element 3

What data is collected by the tracking system

Principle 3.1	Principle 3.2	Principle 3.3	Principle 3.4	Principle 3.5	Principle 3.6
Define recordable PTEs	Collect the minimum data required	Draw on existing data collection efforts	Capture key information about the PTE incident	Determine whose data will (and will not) be collected	Capture organisational responses to PTE exposures

Element 5 principles

ANALYSIS & UTILISATION

Element 5

How is the data analysed, reported, and utilised

| **Principle 5.1** Draw on existing and automated reporting mechanisms | **Principle 5.2** Assign responsibility for analysis and reporting | **Principle 5.3** Analyse the data to produce actionable insights | **Principle 5.4** Report contextual'd data in reports where possible | **Principle 5.5** Report data in formats that are useful and suitable for intended audiences | **Principle 5.6** Enhance and draw on organisational capacity to action insights |

Element 6 principles

Element 6

Monitoring and evaluation of the system

Principle 6.1

Monitor and evaluate system performance against purpose

Principle 6.2

Monitor risks and unintended consequences

Principle 6.3

Demonstrate continuous improvement