

Samaritans Scotland: Ministerial Statement - Scotland's response to the Mental Health Challenge of Covid-19.

Ahead of the ministerial statement detailing the Scottish Government's response to the Covid-19 mental health challenge, this brief sets out some of Samaritans Scotland's priorities for an ongoing plan to support a mental health recovery. Samaritans Scotland is a member of the Ministerial Stakeholder Group examining the response to the Covid-19 mental health challenge and the issues that we highlighted to the group have informed the Scottish Government's mental health response to COVID.

Throughout the pandemic and lockdown, Samaritans' Listening Volunteers have been available to support callers in need 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the first 3 months of lockdown, Samaritans answered more than half a million calls for help. 1 in 4 of our calls were from people who were specifically concerned about Covid-19 – although, our volunteers suggest that Covid-19 has affected every one of our callers in some way. As restrictions change once again, a renewed focus on the mental health and wellbeing of Scotland cannot come too soon.

Prioritisation

- We welcome a statement that underscores the Scottish Government's commitment to addressing the acute impact Covid-19 has had upon mental health and wellbeing, but any new commitments must explicitly either complement or replace existing obligations - such as those in the Mental Health Strategy 2017-2027.
- The significant pressure that Covid-19 has placed on population wellbeing and on mental health services requires a funded action plan with clear decisions on where to target investment and focus resources to maximise impact.

Suicide prevention

- While it is too soon to understand if Covid-19 has led to an increase in suicide rates, our [Covid-19 caller research](#) has shown that some of the [psychological factors](#) that are related to suicidal risk came up often in conversations with our callers including negative thoughts about the future, reduced resilience, lacking social support, rumination and burdensomeness.
- We believe supporting the four workstreams of the National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group - including the crisis support workstream that Samaritans Scotland co-sponsors - should remain a priority for the Scottish Government and CoSLA. The need for real time data on suicide and self-harm – prioritised by the NSPLG – is now ever more important if we are to respond to the impact of this pandemic effectively.
- We recognise the [United to Prevent Suicide](#) campaign as an integral feature in suicide prevention during this particularly difficult time by tackling stigma around suicide and encouraging more people to seek help. We are pleased to be a supporting partner in this, as we have been in the Clear Your Head campaign too.

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Socio-economic inequalities

- Any commitment to support the mental health recovery from Covid-19 must acknowledge that the mental health impact of the pandemic will not be felt evenly across the population. The economic impact of the pandemic will likely exacerbate existing inequalities and could lead to worsening mental health outcomes for at-risk groups, including those living in the poorest communities.
- Our [Dying of Inequality](#) report highlights how suicide risk can increase during times of economic recession, particularly where this is associated with a rise in unemployment.
- Our [Covid-19 caller research](#) showed that there was an increase in calls to Samaritans discussing feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future. Job insecurity, fear of job loss and redundancy were all key concerns. This was especially pronounced among middle-aged men and young people.
- It is vital that policy and services are responsive to the mental health implications of economic uncertainty and inequality both during the coronavirus pandemic and in the recovery. This will require active collaboration across government departments, parliamentary committees and sectors if we are to address the root causes of mental ill health and distress through and after the pandemic.
- We believe that focus needs to be placed on supporting individuals who have engaged with the criminal justice system. We have worked closely with the Scottish Prison Service to ensure ongoing access to our helpline during restrictions. We are now working to reinstate our long-established Listening Scheme in Scottish prisons to improve support for the prison population where this is possible, in line with public health guidance.

Children and young people

- Our [Covid-19 caller research](#) showed that more young people may be struggling as a result of the pandemic. Common concerns raised by young callers include loss of coping mechanisms, loneliness & lack of peer support, and negativity and uncertainty about the future.
- Even before the coronavirus pandemic there were concerning signs that many young people in Scotland were struggling to cope and not receiving the right support – for example, in the ongoing and, as yet, unresolved issues around CAMHS referrals.
- While more data would be required to determine a trend, the suicide rate among young people increased by 50% between 2017 and 2018.
- Data also shows that self-harm has been rising among young people in recent years. Samaritans will release a report later this month which brings together the voices of people with lived experience, stakeholders working across frontline services and the general public to create a comprehensive picture of self-harm and support-seeking in Scotland.
- Finally, recent concerns about the impact of the pandemic on university students facing restrictions have highlighted the importance of considering the mental health of young people more deliberately in all difficult public health decisions required to stem the spread of coronavirus.

Digital

- The coronavirus pandemic has also increased focus on digital innovation and interventions. While we acknowledge that digital resources can be a vital source of support and that access to digital resources should therefore be improved across Scotland, we also recognise the need to improve online safe spaces and remove online threats to mental health security. Our recent [online harms guidance](#) provides best practice industry guidelines for online platforms to manage potentially harmful self-harm and suicide content.
- In addition, if we are to address embedded inequalities in Scotland we must continue to ensure that information, advice, support and services are available to those who cannot benefit from digital innovations because of, for example, poverty, poor digital literacy or geography.

Rural

- Our 19 branches work across Scotland from Shetland to the Borders and our volunteers continue to provide emotional support 24/7. The particular pressures on the remote and rural communities we serve – where isolation and lack of anonymity in accessing services can make seeking help particularly difficult – must be addressed specifically so we can ensure that everyone across Scotland can access the right support whenever and wherever they need it.

Third Sector

- Samaritans has remained a key provider of crisis service and expertise throughout the pandemic.
- In our volunteer survey on caller concerns most volunteers reported speaking to callers who were struggling to access mental health services during lockdown. This includes mental health and crisis teams being unavailable, appointments being cancelled, and difficulties in accessing treatment. When support was more available after the first month, callers described it as inadequate. Samaritans has remained a crucial support for many over this period when statutory services have been unavailable or struggled with capacity.
- We continue to provide specific support to schools, the armed forces, prisoners and workplaces, even though our face to face work has been suspended as we follow public health guidance.
- In addition, Samaritans has supported the Clear Your Head campaign, shared data and expertise to shape the Scottish Government and NSPLG response to COVID and worked with research partners to support improved understanding of COVID's effects on mental health.
- And we have adapted fast to change the technology we use to support our service remaining available to all, 24/7 – which we could not do without the commitment of nearly 1000 volunteers in Scotland.
- Samaritans is far from alone among third sector organisations in this COVID experience. The critical place of the third sector in developing and delivering a national response at this time must not be lost as any future plan is developed, funded and implemented.

For more information please contact our Policy and Communications Officer

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