

## **Briefing: Valuing the Third Sector**

In advance of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee debate ‘Valuing the Third Sector’ on the 1<sup>st</sup> of December we wanted to share some insights on our volunteer-led emotional support service, the value of enhancing volunteer opportunities for the sector and the people of Scotland, and the sustainability of the third sector as we move towards a Covid-19 recovery.

### **Samaritans’ emotional support service**

- Our 116 123 helpline and email service offer free emotional support to anyone struggling or in distress. Our support service has remained open 24/7 during the coronavirus pandemic to listen to those who needed to talk. In the first three months of lockdown across the UK & ROI, our volunteers provided support over half a million times via phone and email.
- It is too early to know the effect of coronavirus on mental wellbeing, and it is important to remember a rise in suicide rates is not inevitable. However, our [evidence](#) shows that as well as having an impact on people’s wellbeing, the pandemic is having an impact on factors we know are related to suicide risk – demonstrating the importance of our volunteer-led support service as we continue to live with coronavirus.
- As we move towards Christmas our helpline and email service will continue to support those feeling alone or struggling during the festive season. Samaritans’ research shows that being separated from friends & family over the festive period is one of the main concerns facing our callers. Over 1,400 Samaritans volunteers across the UK & ROI will be on shift this Christmas to listen to anyone feeling alone.

### **Volunteering**

- At Samaritans our volunteers are at the heart of everything we do. We currently have nineteen branches and around 1000 volunteers in Scotland from the Borders to the Highlands & Islands. Over the course of the pandemic we moved swiftly to bring forward technology changes to support our lines and to bring volunteer recruitment and training online. As well as providing our helpline service to those in need, these individuals with training in listening skills, and an understanding of mental distress and suicide, are members of communities across Scotland and are able to share their expertise with family, friends and acquaintances.
- Whilst our face-to-face outreach services are currently suspended, these are a core feature of the community outreach usually provided by our branches.
- At the start of the pandemic there was an admirable enthusiasm from the people of Scotland to support their community’s wellbeing in any way they could. We believe that the Scottish Government should consider ways to capitalise on this enthusiasm to support the services provided by the third sector.
- Enhancing volunteer opportunities for people in Scotland would be valuable for both third sector organisations delivering vital services and to the volunteer’s own wellbeing. Research undertaken by [Volunteer Scotland](#) has presented clear evidence for the positive impact of volunteering on health and wellbeing through increasing social connectedness and community engagement. The skills learnt through training with organisations like Samaritans are also important for wider life, including access to the job market.

### **Sustainability of the third sector**

- The impact of coronavirus will not be felt equally across the population. The pandemic has exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities and worsened mental health and wellbeing outcomes for those already at-risk and those living in the most deprived communities. It is essential that vital funding is sustained into recovery to ensure that those impacted the most by the pandemic are not further disadvantaged by the closure of third sector services on which they rely.
- It is vital that the third sector does not take the brunt of the economic recession resulting from Covid-19. As we move towards a coronavirus recovery the Scottish Government must recognise the value of the third sector through sustainable funding packages. Third sector organisations, which are often embedded in local communities, are often a lifeline for the most socially and economically disadvantaged people in Scotland.

Covid-19 has seen a renewed sense of community resilience and altruism from the people of Scotland. This presents a unique opportunity for the future of the third sector to take up a more central role in the delivery of support and services, and the improvement of community and population health and wellbeing. The Scottish Government should not let this moment pass and must reflect the value it believes the third sector brings to Scottish society with sustained funding and a continued commitment to an equal voice for the third sector in policy and decision making processes at national level.

### **Further Information**

If you would like further information and support please contact [m.gordon@samaritans.org](mailto:m.gordon@samaritans.org)