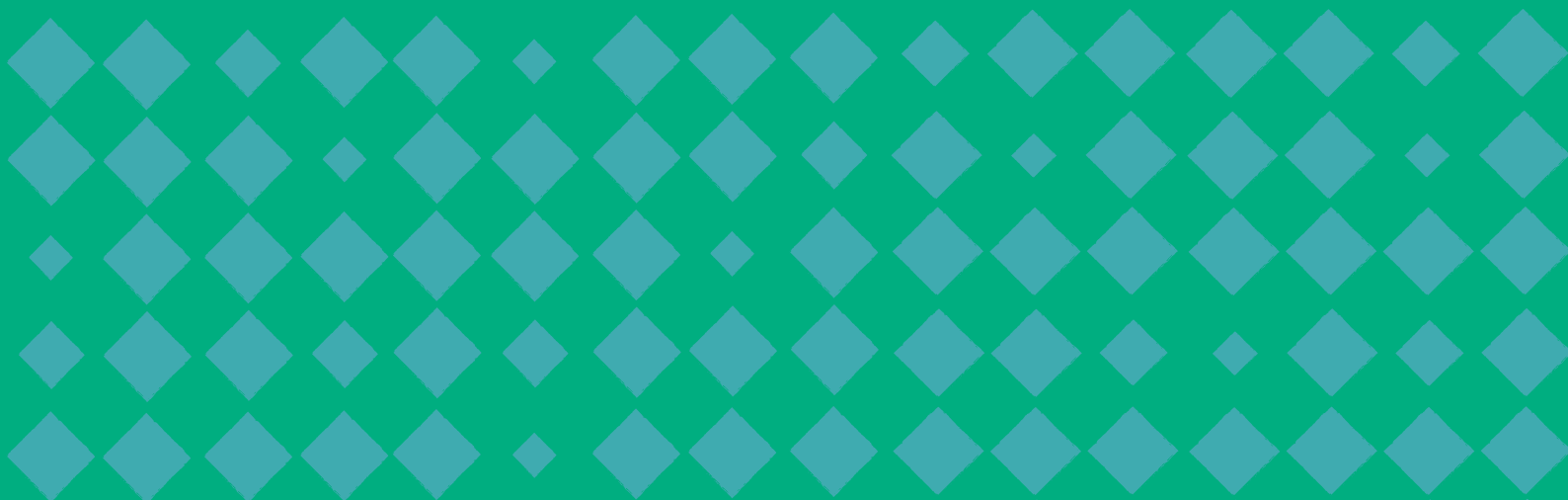


SAMARITANS
Scotland

6 priorities to help save lives

March 2021



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Our priorities for the next Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament

We are calling on the next Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament to:

1. Commit to an ambitious, fully-funded, 10-year strategy to prevent suicide in Scotland
2. Strengthen data and intelligence sharing to inform prevention
3. Commit to a national strategy to improve support for people affected by self-harm and address underlying causes
4. Develop a cross-sector response to mental health and inequality
5. Invest in creative on- and off-line interventions to reduce loneliness & isolation
6. Support the third and voluntary sector to play an integral role in Scotland's recovery from the coronavirus pandemic

Introduction

As Scotland's leading charity for suicide prevention and crisis support, Samaritans Scotland has been there to listen for people in crisis and distress for more than six decades. Over sixty years on from answering our first call for help we are continuing to work towards a future where fewer lives are lost to suicide, where more people feel able to ask for help when they are struggling, and where the right support is available at the right time.

This work has never been more vital. The latest available annual data shows that 833 people in Scotland lost their lives to suicide in 2019¹, with suicide rates increasing for the second consecutive year. Every one of those deaths is a tragedy and a heart-breaking loss for families, friends and communities. In recent years, the Scottish Health Survey has also shown worrying

¹ National Records of Scotland: Probable Suicides, 2019

signs of rising rates of self-harm and increasing levels of depression and anxiety among both men and women in Scotland².

While it is still too early to know the full impact of the coronavirus pandemic, we have already seen how this crisis is exacerbating and deepening many of the pressures and inequalities that contribute to poor mental health and which may increase suicide risk.

Now more than ever it is vital that Scotland's ambitions for strengthening suicide prevention and supporting mental wellbeing rise to the scale of the challenge. While the coronavirus pandemic continues to pose unprecedented challenges we have also witnessed how policy-makers, public services, the voluntary sector and communities have responded to these challenges with collaboration, innovation and compassion.

Scotland's next Government and Parliament should harness this opportunity and put mental health and wellbeing at the heart of Scotland's recovery. The six priorities below are intended as a starting point, setting out how the next Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament can help to ensure more people get the right support, at the right time, and ultimately save lives.

1. Commit to an ambitious, fully-funded, 10-year strategy to prevent suicide in Scotland

As a member of the National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group (NSPLG) we have played a leading role in supporting delivery of Scotland's current Suicide Prevention Action Plan - *Every Life Matters* - which runs until 2021.

While the current plan has galvanised suicide prevention efforts across sectors, services and communities, there is still much more to do. The next Scottish Government must therefore commit to, and seek cross-party support for, a long-term national strategy that will build on the achievements of *Every Life Matters* and embed suicide prevention within national and local policy and services.

This strategy should not only continue efforts to strengthen support for people at the point of suicidal crisis but take ambitious action to address the underlying factors that contribute to suicide risk, through a greater focus on early prevention and intervention. It must also address some key areas omitted from the current strategy, such as reducing risk at locations of concern or from access to means. It must be fully-funded, with a clear plan for implementation and ongoing evaluation to ensure its aims are realised. Crucially, this strategy must be shaped by people who have lived experienced of suicide and informed by stakeholders working across frontline services and the third sector.

2. Strengthen data and intelligence sharing to inform prevention

Scotland's commitment to prevent suicide and improve support for people in crisis and distress must be informed by the best possible data and intelligence. In particular, there need

² Scottish Health Survey 2019: Volume 1: Main Report

to be robust systems for gathering and sharing ongoing intelligence between agencies and services so that emerging risks and trends can be identified and addressed, quickly and effectively.

The next Scottish Government must ensure that the commitments set out in *Every Life Matters* to develop a universal system of review into deaths by suicide, improve data / evidence sharing and strengthen local suicide prevention plans, are fully realised and implemented. Scotland's future suicide prevention strategy must build on this progress by outlining actions to embed data and intelligence sharing at a national and local levels and support a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

3. Commit to a national strategy to improve support for people affected by self-harm and address underlying causes

Self-harm is a serious public health issue that affects individuals and families across Scotland, but it is also one that is often hidden and poorly understood. Data from the Scottish Health Survey shows the proportion of Scots who have ever self-harmed has more than doubled over the last decade, while around 1 in 6 young people are estimated to have self-harmed³. Despite this, self-harm is not a priority within existing mental health or suicide prevention policy.

Our recent report [*Hidden Too Long: uncovering self-harm in Scotland*](#) found that stigma around self-harm is often a barrier to seeking help while challenges around capacity, expertise and accessibility of frontline and specialist services may prevent people from getting the support they need.

The next Government should seek cross-party support in the new Scottish Parliament for a dedicated strategy to improve understanding of self-harm, strengthen support for those affected and address underlying causes. This strategy must work in tandem with wider suicide prevention, mental health and public health policy and be informed by people with lived experience of self-harm and those working across frontline services.

4. Develop a cross-sector response to mental health and inequality

Inequality plays a significant role in increasing the risk of suicide, self-harm and poor mental health. Today, someone living in one of Scotland's poorest communities is more than three times more likely to die by suicide than someone living in one of the most affluent⁴. Similarly, rates of self-harm and indicators of poor mental health are also higher among people experiencing poverty and deprivation⁵.

³ Scottish Health Survey 2019: Volume 1: Main Report

⁴ Scottish Public Health Observatory *Suicide Deprivation Overview: 2019*

⁵ Scottish Health Survey 2019: Volume 1: Main Report

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to deepen and exacerbate existing inequalities, Scotland must take urgent action to recognise and address the impact of inequality on mental health. The next Scottish Government should work in partnership across the private, public and third sector, to develop compassionate, effective responses to anyone experiencing crisis or distress as a result of economic hardship, facilitating links between different support services.

This programme of work should include targeted interventions for groups identified as being at increased risk and consider a range of barriers to accessing support, including the particular needs of people living in remote and rural locations.

It is vital that work to develop a holistic approach to mental health and inequality is part of far-reaching action to ultimately reduce levels of inequality overall. If it is not, Scotland will continue to see the devastating impact of inequality on the mental health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.

5. Invest in creative on- and off-line interventions to reduce loneliness & isolation

In the first nine months since lockdown restrictions began in March 2020, 3 in 10 calls to Samaritans talked about loneliness and isolation - a 10% increase compared to the same period in the previous year⁶. A growing body of external evidence suggests that levels of loneliness have increased among the general population during this period with young people more likely to report feeling lonely than other age groups⁷.

Research shows that persistent loneliness can pose a significant risk to health and wellbeing and is associated with increased suicide risk, while strong social connections can act as a protective factor. It is therefore vital that the next Government takes preventative action to address the potential impact of an increase in loneliness and isolation resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. This should include targeted interventions for groups who were already at an increased risk of loneliness and isolation, for example: low-income middle-aged men, young people around life transitions and people living in remote or isolated communities.

Since the beginning of social restrictions, many voluntary and community groups have moved towards online delivery to support those they work with to stay connected. The next Government should invest in ongoing, community-led innovation to develop and sustain new models for reducing loneliness and isolation, including efforts to address digital exclusion. This investment should be backed by a framework for evaluation and knowledge-sharing to support adapting and extending examples of good practice.

⁶ Samaritans caller data 2020

⁷ Samaritans: [Understanding our callers during the coronavirus pandemic - coronavirus, young people and self-harm](#) February 2021

6. Support the third and voluntary sector to play an integral role in Scotland's recovery from coronavirus

Samaritans volunteers answer a call for help every 7 seconds. And they've been here to listen, 24/7, for anyone in crisis and distress throughout the coronavirus pandemic. This is just one of many examples where the third sector – often powered by volunteers - has worked to ensure the continuation of essential services and support.

Scotland's third sector has proven itself to be a crucial partner in the coronavirus response and can play a critical role in Scotland's recovery by delivering essential services as well as supporting capacity-building, employability and wellbeing through volunteering opportunities.

However, realising this potential requires sustained investment, recognising the significant and ongoing impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the sector. Research by the Scottish Charity Regulator found that 79% of charities said the pandemic had impacted their finances, while 70% said that the pandemic had negatively affected their beneficiaries⁸.

In addition to sustainable investment to support core activities, the next Scottish Government should support coordinated action to remove barriers to volunteering and support diversity and inclusion so that more people and communities are empowered to play a meaningful role in Scotland's recovery.

For more information, contact Mairi Gordon, Communications & Policy Officer, at m.gordon@samaritans.org

⁸ OSCR COVID-19 Impact on Charities (Waves Two) November 2020

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