

**Opening Statement by Niall Mulligan, Samaritans Ireland Executive Director to the Joint Oireachtas  
Sub-Committee on Mental Health**

**To discuss access and continuity of treatment for those in need of mental health services, with specific  
reference to the impact of COVID-19 on demand and delivery of services**

**Tuesday, 5 October 2021**

I would like to begin by thanking the Chair and members of the committee for inviting Samaritans Ireland here today to discuss the impact COVID-19 has had on our nation's mental health and on our organisation. I am joined today by Rory Fitzgerald, Samaritans Volunteer and Regional Director for the Republic of Ireland, and Sarah Stack, our Communications and Policy Manager.

### **ABOUT SAMARITANS**

Samaritans is the only 24-hour freephone emotional support helpline covering the entire island of Ireland. We are a volunteer-led organisation with more than 2,000 volunteers in 21 branches, and 12-core staff. We believe every life lost to suicide is a tragedy, and we work tirelessly to reach more people and make suicide prevention a priority.

Coronavirus has undoubtedly been the most serious challenge Samaritans has faced in our 60 years in Ireland. When restrictions were enforced, volunteers and branch directors worked hard to adapt to new safety guidelines to ensure our branches could remain open and safe for all our volunteers coming in.

At one stage of the pandemic up to 40% of our volunteers were cocooning, either to protect themselves or to protect a family member. Despite this, we remained open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This achievement was down to our remaining volunteers signing up for additional shifts each week.

In the first 12 months of coronavirus restrictions, we listened for over 100,000 hours. Our volunteers received approximately 1,500 calls and emails for help every day and without their dedication those calls for support would have gone unanswered, and our callers left unheard.

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Samaritans Ireland is a charity registered in the Republic of Ireland (20033668) and incorporated as a company limited by guarantee (450409). Samaritans Ireland's registered office is located at 4-5 Usher's Court, Usher's Quay, Dublin 8, D08Y223. CHY number: CHY11880. The directors/trustees of Samaritans Ireland are as follows: E Farrell, K Flood, D O'Críodan, C Skelly, D Walsh (United Kingdom), G Danton (United Kingdom) J Trenaman, É Ní Mhuircheartaigh, R Fitzgerald, A Heron (United Kingdom)



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## WHAT CALLERS ARE SAYING

Throughout 2020, and into 2021, loneliness and isolation remained among the top reasons why people called Samaritans. We also supported people with a mental health crisis – some whose services were impacted by restrictions - and thousands of people with family or relationship issues, job or financial insecurity worries, people experiencing bereavement, and high levels of anxiety over the coronavirus pandemic. More recently, callers are discussing their anxieties over the easing of restrictions, their fears associated with this easing, and a return to the new normal.

We have noted a number of key findings from our work in 2020:

- Samaritans volunteers answered a call for help every 56 seconds
- While 1 in 3 callers mentioned coronavirus directly, our volunteers reported it was a feature in almost every call.
- Our busiest time of day was from 6pm to 10pm, when over a quarter of our daily calls were answered.
- We maintained our Listener Support Scheme in Irish prisons and will mark 20 years of supporting the prison population in Ireland in 2022.
- The way in which anxieties were discussed evolved over the pandemic from at first being primarily rooted in health concerns: i.e. that the caller, or a loved one, were going to contract COVID-19, to concerns around the lasting implications of the virus, and in particular the potential ongoing socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic.

## SUPPORTING VULNERABLE GROUPS

While our 24-hour helpline and email service are core to what we do, Samaritans is also a lead agency in supporting and training other NGOs in their work with vulnerable people, particularly people who are at high risk of emotional distress, self-harm, and suicide.

The impact of the pandemic on the public led to groups and organisations, not usually working in the area of mental health and wellbeing, beginning to receive distressing or suicidal calls. We responded to requests from numerous organisations to offer our support and expertise to their staff and volunteers on how to support their callers.

For some organisations offering services over telephone or virtually for the first time introduced challenges around meeting best practices on data protection and security, and we provided resources to meet these challenges.

We continue to work with the staff and volunteers of organisations who are working in areas such as addiction, homelessness, long term unemployment, and domestic and sexual violence, and we work with members of the Traveller Community, with prisoners, members of the LGBTI+ community and with people living in rural isolation. We train staff and volunteers on how to listen and support people who are going through difficult times or those who are in crisis. Equally, we train these staff and volunteers to look out for each other and to look after each other.

Though our face-to-face training was suspended at the start of COVID-19 restrictions, we were able to adapt our training programmes to the online environment. While this was at times a challenge, an unexpected outcome of online training is that we are now able to support people and groups in some of the most rural parts of the country, who previously we may not have been able to reach. And while we look forward to returning to face-to-face sessions, we also recognise the value of being able to maintain an online-training and workshop presence.

Even before the pandemic, we supported six different helplines to divert callers into our own freephone helpline, 116 123. When their lines close after hours, callers are invited to stay on the line to be transferred to a Samaritans volunteer if they wish. This was done to offer a more cohesive response to a person in distress and acts as a safety net for that caller. It has proven to be vital for someone who may need support when other agencies are closed.

In partnership with the Irish Government's Emigrant Support Programme, we also provide our listening service to the Irish Diaspora living in certain countries overseas. We launched the service in 2018 in the United Arab Emirates, China, Hong Kong, and Poland, and this was extended over Christmas 2020 to also include Canada and Australia. These helplines have been especially helpful over the past 18 months to support those expats facing additional hardships from COVID-19 or who were unable to travel home due to ongoing restrictions.

## CONCLUSION

Being there and listening to others in need is at the heart of what Samaritans across Ireland do. Our volunteers dutifully stepped up in this national crisis, they kept our services going when people needed us to be there for them, and they answered over half a million calls in 2020.

We are immensely proud of the role each, and every one of our volunteers has and continues to play during the pandemic crisis, being there to offer their support every hour of every day to anyone who needed someone to talk to. For that we thank them wholeheartedly.

Thank you for your time here today. We welcome any questions you may have.