



# DIGITAL FUTURES

## Executive summary

*"So many of us live so much of our lives online, having additional support in the online world is vital. It can be hard to seek help. Whatever we think about it, social media is taking over from talking, and so to have appropriate support available is vital."*

Digital Futures participant

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## Background

The internet plays a central role in many people's daily lives and it is becoming increasingly common for people to go online when they need support. There are a number of opportunities and challenges for emotional support and suicide reduction in the online environment. The internet offers people support networks and increased access to information, helping those who may feel isolated and alone to reach out to others. However, whilst it can be an invaluable source of support, it can also lead down a dark and dangerous path where vulnerable people are exploited, harassed and bullied and where distress goes unnoticed or unaddressed.

In response to these issues, Samaritans undertook 'Digital Futures', a six month knowledge and learning project which aimed to understand more about the online environment, as well as the specific needs of those who actively seek support in that space.

## Methodology

The project consisted of three multimethod streams involving people who had sought support for themselves or someone else online, professionals working in the sector and our volunteers.

	Public consultation stream	Professional sector consultation stream	Volunteer consultation stream
<b>Who</b>	People who had sought support for themselves or someone else online and internet users with an interest in this area.	People working in online communications, technology, social media, research, data protection and privacy. Charities that offer services in the online environment and/or are developing new services.	Samaritans volunteers.
<b>Why</b>	To understand the experiences and challenges of people with lived experience of struggling to cope or of supporting others online.	To learn from others working in relevant sectors and ensure we are aware of the latest trends and evidence, including understanding of data and privacy issues associated with developing online services.  To make sure that any projects we develop are sustainable with developments in technology and online communications.	To ensure volunteers are involved in all aspects of our development work.  To learn from the expertise of volunteers who have experience of online service delivery and direct experience of providing our service.
<b>How</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regular updates on Samaritans Digital Futures website.</li> <li>Samaritans-led Twitter chats, blog posts and an online survey.</li> <li>Updates and feedback through Samaritans social media channels.</li> <li>Dedicated Digital Futures email address.</li> <li>Independent research commissioned through external agency, Truth, involving a series of online forums and focus groups.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cross-sector discussion day consisting of a series of workshop sessions.</li> <li>Podcast interviews with professionals involved in Digital Futures.</li> <li>One to one telephone interviews with individuals from charities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A volunteer reference group with 25 volunteers interested in and/or with experience in working in the online environment. The group reviewed all project documentation as well as debating the key issues.</li> <li>Dedicated pages and forum discussions on Samaritans internal intranet.</li> <li>Updates sent via internal newsletter.</li> </ul>

## Key findings

- Of the 657 who took part in Samaritans' online survey, over three quarters (77%) had looked for support online when they had been struggling to cope. The most common method of support-seeking was to search for information about how they were feeling online. Almost all of these (92%) respondents had done this and 72% of those had found it either 'helpful' or 'very helpful'.
- Other ways to seek support included sharing feelings on social media (62%) and talking to others on social media who'd had similar experiences (63%). Simply sharing feelings seemed to be less helpful as a way of looking for support with just (45%) of respondents finding it helpful or very helpful. However, 73% of those who had actively talked with someone on social media who had similar experiences considered this helpful or very helpful.  
*"Knowing someone had gone through the same thing made me more prepared to listen; even more than to my friends"*
- Just over half of those who had sought help online had used self-help tools (59%). 54% had joined a forum or community.
- A quarter (26%) had talked with a professional counsellor online.

People recognised the challenge of optimising the online environment for emotional support – what is effective support for one person may not be for another. Opinion was divided over whether it was appropriate for a charity to reach out online.

Some survey respondents said that if they were having a tough time, they would want a charity to reach out online and offer support but others were undecided or didn't want this type of intervention, with 7% strongly disagreeing with this.

### A number of recurring themes emerged around what people want in emotional support online:

- More safe online spaces.
- Support from like-minded people.
- To be able to express themselves without the need to censor.
- Instant and consistent support 24/7.
- To be able to find good online support quickly and easily.
- A variety of options for support.

People with knowledge of the sector told us that **any new development should be led by the needs of the people that use it** and not by technological developments. They highlighted a need to continuously work to better understand online audiences; how they want to use services and what they need to feel supported online. **Privacy and authentication of those using services online is a key issue** and although there are risks in this area and in security online, it was felt by many that it is worth taking these risks to support people.

Harmful content was discussed as a challenge of the online environment, an area that is currently undefined and without consensus on the best way to approach it. **Collaboration between organisations** to develop and elevate positive online content could be achievable and with the potential to have a high impact as an alternative for internet users.

Other charities offered us insights into the unique challenges the online environment raises for this sector. There was some consensus throughout that **Samaritans has a responsibility to do more** in the online environment, but this will create a number of challenges in areas where precedents are yet to be set and prior experiences are limited or non-existent. For users of services, there are a number of potential barriers also to consider, but this doesn't take away from the power that technology has to encourage people to reach out and seek help.

This piece of work is the starting point for an exciting period of change and transformation within Samaritans that will put our service users at the heart of what we do and work in partnership to ensure that we keep pace with the modern world and ways in which people communicate.

As we have gone through this process we have come to a realisation that we need to undergo a large scale digital transformation as a charity and review

everything we do to see whether 'digital' could help us to do it better. There are a number of exciting ideas that people raised throughout the consultation. We have heard all of these and will be taking some time and working with as many of you as possible to explore these further in finding the most effective ways to empower people to choose the support they want to access on any given day depending on their needs.

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