

# West Highlands and Skye Project Evaluation

Final Report

March 2024

Samaritans

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# 1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of Iconic Consulting's evaluation of Samaritans West Highlands and Skye project.

## Background

Scottish Government awarded Samaritans a grant in 2021 to develop a programme of targeted promotion of services and new resources to extend the organisation's reach to improve mental health and resilience in the West Highlands and Skye. The grant was awarded from the Transition and Recovery Fund. The total cost of the project was initially estimated as £610,000 over a three year period.

The project was co-designed by Samaritans staff and volunteers to address a gap in the organisation's on-the-ground presence and the persistently high rate of suicide in the West Highlands and Skye. Overall, the project aimed to raise awareness and increase engagement in the range of Samaritans services and support opportunities in the area. The specific aims of the project, at the outset, were:

- To enable intensive locally-focused work in West Highlands and Skye which will raise awareness and marketing on the services of the Samaritans, and support the development of workplace and community training and resilience skills (to build on the wider service expansion by Samaritans into the Highlands).
- To help reach more people in West Highlands and Skye by reducing stigma associated with mental health and suicide, encouraging help seeking behaviours, and increasing signposting to local and national support.
- To create an active and diverse group of volunteers in the West Highlands delivering Samaritans services as part of the email hub, including focusing on recruiting a volunteer base among isolated/lone workers in the local community.

The project had a focus on lone and isolated workers. This had, partly, evolved from the experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. For many people, their work environment changed significantly during the pandemic with an increase in home working and less physical interaction with colleagues, service users and other organisations. For the purposes of the West Highlands and Skye project the term lone and isolated workers was used to refer to:

- Those who work physically isolated from other workers because of location, time or nature of the work being done, and therefore have no or very limited access to fellow workers or supervisors.
- Those who may work in pairs but nevertheless are working in a situation which makes them vulnerable in the same way that physically isolated workers are.
- Those who may not be physically isolated but who are isolated from the community, perhaps as a result of being a transient worker, for example, in the hospitality industry.
- Those who work in a team but are isolated within their team because of professional expectations and/or confidentiality concerns, for example, GPs and NHS workers.

The project had four workstreams:

- Communications and marketing – To raise awareness of Samaritans services in the local community; to implement a behaviour change campaign to encourage help-seeking.

- Learning and development – To design, develop, implement and evaluate a flexible suite of tools and resources to support mental health and wellbeing in lone and isolated workers.
- Research – To deliver primary research into protective factors for suicide, self-harm and mental wellbeing among lone and isolated workers which will help to inform improvements in intervention and support.
- Volunteering and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) – To create an active diverse group of volunteers delivering Samaritans services via email, including recruiting a volunteer base among lone/isolated workers in the local community.

Scottish Government only confirmed the 2021/22 funding, formally, in October 2021 which delayed the start of the project. In March 2022, Samaritans delivered their Real People Real Stories awareness campaign specifically in the West Highlands and Skye with funding from the Scottish Government and NFU Mutual Charitable Trust. Supported by National Rail, the campaign was aimed primarily at men aged 20-59 - those most at risk of suicide. A consultant was also commissioned to better understand how Samaritans could communicate effectively with stakeholders and the community in West Highlands and Skye. Scottish Government confirmed the second year's funding in spring 2022 and this allowed Samaritans to accelerate implementation.

A Project Manager and an Assistant were appointed in July 2022. A Project Delivery Plan was also produced at that time. It contained detailed plans for the four workstreams setting out the planned activities, timelines, measures, and potential risks. The Plan contained a theory of change showing the relationship between the key themes, activities, and outcomes. The Plan also contained the following underpinning principles of delivery:

- Work as one Samaritans community made up of both staff and volunteers.
- Seek out and listen to the views of local communities to shape our work so that we are relevant
- Work in partnership with local agencies and community leaders.
- Be responsive to diversity within both geographic communities and communities of interest; focus on the hyper-local wherever possible.
- Deliver with a focus on demonstrating impact.
- Learn together collaboratively, acknowledging that we are working in a new area with new approaches.
- Create a legacy in reach, learning and resource for the community, for Samaritans and for Scotland's wider suicide prevention work.

The Scottish Government Grant Letter, dated November 2022, included a series of targets/milestones which Samaritans has used to track progress. This has occurred internally in forward planning and during Project Delivery Group meetings throughout 2023, as well as externally in the Progress Reports submitted to Scottish Government in May and December 2023. The Grant Letter stated that Scottish Government funding did not cover the volunteering workstream. It did, however, state that Scottish Government "are pleased to note Samaritans' intention to deliver a legacy of this project which includes creating an active group of Samaritans volunteers in the West Highlands and Skye". Subsequent discussions with Scottish Government in 2023 allowed Samaritans to use some underspend towards the volunteer recruitment costs.

## Evaluation

In April 2023, Samaritans commissioned Iconic Consulting to evaluate the West Highlands and Skye project. The brief set out the following requirements:

- Developing and articulating the programme theory or logic that underpins the project.
- Assessing adherence/alignment to the underpinning principles of delivery including seeking out and listening to the views of local communities to shape the work.
- Measuring the implementation and outcomes of the four core workstreams in relation to their key deliverables and indicators.
- Measuring the overall impact of the project on lone and isolated workers in the communities of interest.

The evaluation consisted of:

- A review of key documents including the Project Delivery Plan, Grant Letter, Progress Reports, minutes of Project Delivery and Advisory Group meetings, and outputs from the four workstreams.
- Consultation with Samaritans staff including the project team and workstream leads.
- Observation of the Project Delivery Group and Project Advisory Group meetings throughout 2023.
- Consultation with 14 stakeholders from public and third sector organisations in the area who had been involved with the project.
- Consultation with two of the volunteers recruited during the project.
- Review of the communication and marketing campaign.
- Feedback from training participants via a follow-up survey and telephone consultation.
- Observation of two webinars delivered as part of the learning and development programme.
- Analysis of evidence gathered by Samaritans on the learning and development, communications and marketing, and volunteering activities. This included numbers engaging in training and volunteering, and feedback from training participants.
- Thematic analysis of the above material to draw out the key findings presented in this report.

We produced a Monitoring and Evaluation Plan in July 2023. The Plan was informed by Samaritans Research Ethics Policy and Guidelines for Researchers, as well as consultation with Samaritans Senior Research Manager. The Monitoring and Evaluation Plan further developed the theory of change from the Project Delivery Plan and is shown in the Appendix. As the project developed, Samaritans revised some of the workstream objectives, with the agreement of Scottish Government.

## Report structure

This report is structured as follows:

- Project management, networking and governance (chapter 2).
- Learning and development workstream (chapter 3).
- Volunteering workstream (chapter 4).
- Communications and marketing workstream (chapter 5).
- Research workstream (chapter 6).
- Conclusions and recommendations (chapter 7).

## 2 Project management, networking and governance

This chapter focuses on the project management, networking and governance aspects of Samaritans West Highlands and Skye project. Learning for Samaritans and other organisations emerging from the project is highlighted.

### Overview

The West Highlands and Skye project was well managed by Samaritans. The Project Delivery Group, led by the Project Manager, met regularly throughout the project and played an important part in project management and implementation. The project benefitted greatly from the presence of the Project Manager and the Assistant in the area and the networking and awareness raising they undertook. The Project Advisory Group provided governance and oversight which the members found useful.

### Project management

Samaritans created two new full-time posts to deliver the project: the West Highland and Skye Project and Partnerships Manager, and the West Highland and Skye Project and Partnerships Assistant. As stated in chapter 1, the Manager's post was first filled in July 2022. After the previous postholder left for personal reasons, the current Manager started in January 2023 and agreed a 30 hour per week (0.85 Full time equivalent) with Samaritans. The Assistant has been in post since July 2022. The Manager and Assistant are based in the West Highlands and Skye and have extensive experience of working in the area. Their local knowledge and connections were invaluable.

The project has been overseen by Samaritan's Executive Director for Scotland. The current postholder joined the organisation in September 2022. The previous postholder had been involved in developing the project. Samaritans' Operations Lead for Scotland has provided additional support to the project when required.

Samaritans identified relevant staff to lead implementation of the four workstreams. The Project Manager led the Research workstream, with support from Samaritans Senior Research Manager. The other workstreams were led by the following Samaritans staff who incorporated the project into their existing workload: Influencing Manager (Communications and Marketing workstream), Commercial Learning and Development Manager (Learning and Development workstream), and Service Expansion Manager (Volunteering and EDI workstream). These staff are based across the UK.

The Project Delivery Plan stated that a Project Delivery Group would be established to 'focus on detailed operational planning and delivery of the project against plan/budget'. The Group was subsequently set up with a membership of the Project Manager and Assistant, the Executive Director for Scotland, and the workstream leads. The Group met throughout the project with a hiatus when the Manager's post was vacant in late 2022. Following the appointment of the second Project Manager, meetings occurred fortnightly throughout 2023 although a pragmatic and flexible approach was applied with meetings postponed when there was no pressing need. The members of the group demonstrated great commitment to the project through their ongoing

attendance and positive contributions; this was especially true of the workstream leads given their existing workloads and demands on their time. Although the meetings were, at times, limited to progress updates from the workstream leads, they served a useful purpose, in our view, in terms of creating momentum. Members of the group reported it had been useful to meet regularly as it helped communications and ensured they maintained a focus on delivery. Some members of the group suggested it provided a model for project management and collaboration that Samaritans could apply to other projects, contrasting it with some of their previous experience of project working in the organisation.

“It was hugely valuable to be connected to all the different elements of the project. It helped with communication. It helped with collaboration. It helped with people feeling they were making a difference. It was handled really pragmatically so we met when there was stuff to update on and if there nothing to update on the meeting was cancelled... Project team meetings like this doesn't always happen in Samaritans. It has been a really good model, or example, to set for quite a lot of teams in Samaritans, for keeping that connection, momentum, accountability it was really efficient... You can't underestimate its value in terms of the project staying on track and achieving as much as it achieved. Yes, people might have thought it was a big commitment to meet every fortnight but the results of the project speak to the value of the meetings”. Project Delivery Group member.

Members of the Project Delivery Group reported the appointment of the second Project Manager in January 2023 provided impetus to the group meetings and the project as a whole. They were very positive about the Project Manager's impact, and the Assistant, while emphasising that this was not a criticism of the initial Project Manager who was in post for a short period of time. It was noted that Samaritans as a whole had, initially, made limited progress in implementing the Project Delivery Plan. As well as the vacancy in the Project Manager's post, Samaritans consultees suggested the reasons for this relatively slow start were due to delayed confirmation of the funding, the ongoing impact of Covid-19, internal organisational change, clarifying internal roles and responsibilities, and undertaking the project's preliminary market research. As a result, members of the Project Delivery Group viewed the delivery period as starting in earnest in January 2023. In terms of learning for Samaritans, it was suggested the initial stages of the project would have benefitted from a plan that set out intended roles and responsibilities, and timescales (the Project Delivery Plan was not produced until summer 2022). It was also suggested a session at the start of the project involving members of the Project Delivery Group would have been beneficial in kickstarting delivery.

#### Learning for Samaritans:

- The Project Delivery Group served a useful purpose in terms of creating momentum; meeting regularly helped communications and ensured workstream leads maintained a focus on delivery.
- The Project Manager provided impetus to the group meetings and the project as a whole.
- A session at the start of the project involving members of the Project Delivery Group would have been beneficial in kickstarting delivery had it clarified roles, responsibilities and timescales at the outset.

#### Learning for Samaritans and other organisations:

- Project delivery timelines can be adversely affected by a range of internal and external

issues including staff recruitment/retention, confirmation of funding, and organisational change. This can have a knock-on effect on outcomes and impact.

## Networking

The West Highlands and Skye project benefitted greatly, in our view, from the presence of the Project Manager and Assistant in the area and the networking they undertook. The team met with numerous public and third sector organisations in order to raise awareness of the project and the planned activities, and to identify opportunities for joint working. This networking included meetings with specific organisations such as High Life Highland and RSABI<sup>1</sup>, as well as meetings and presentations to local networks or forums such as Skye and Lochalsh Alcohol and Drugs Forum and Scotland's Rural Mental Health Forum. The team reported that the local networking was resource intensive. Nonetheless, the value and benefit of the networking was evident during our stakeholder consultations. For example, it was reported that a presentation the Project Manager made to the Highland Choose Life Steering Group – a multi-agency suicide prevention group which includes Samaritans Deputy Regional Director for Scotland – had been well received with members valuing Samaritans investment in the area and the commitment to create long-lasting benefits. Several consultees reported that their involvement in the project had come about either from their own contact with the project team or from word of mouth from colleagues or acquaintances.

“Someone I know had previously had contact with the Samaritans project; the Project Manager had made a presentation to them. They told me about Samaritans and I was really interested in what they were doing so I made contact with them. We had a chat and they came and spoke to us at one of our meetings about everything they were doing in West Highlands... It was very useful to meet. It helped our team get its head around what they do and gave us some ideas for the future. A few months later they got back in touch and offered to run a course dedicated to us”. Stakeholder.

In addition, several consultees suggested they would be interested in exploring future opportunities with Samaritans in West Highlands and Skye. There was an affinity with Samaritans, its purpose and values. There were also ideas on how they may be able to work with the organisation. We therefore recommend Samaritans contacts a wide range of public and third sector organisations in the area to update them on progress to date and on future plans, as well as seeking to generate leads that could be developed further.

“We could work together and take things a lot further with Samaritans. Having the Samaritans on board would give us more oomph”. Stakeholder.

**Recommendation 1: Samaritans contacts a wide range of public and third sector organisations in the area to update them on progress to date and on future plans, as well as seeking to generate leads that could be developed further.**

Although the majority of consultees praised the project's networking and awareness raising, it should be noted that some minor issues were also raised. There was a view that Samaritans messaging was a little unclear in terms of what the project was offering and hoping to achieve in

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1 Royal Scottish Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RSABI) is a Scottish charity that provides practical, emotional and financial support to all people involved in the Scottish agricultural industry.



West Highlands and Skye. It is possible these comments were more relevant to the early stages of the project when it was still evolving. There was also a view that Samaritans could have sought to create stronger links with some local organisations, particularly those supporting mental wellbeing and small employers/organisations supporting small employers. We concur with these comments although capacity may have limited the project's ability to fully engage local organisations as the finite resources meant the team had to prioritise.

It was clear that the project team enabled Samaritans to undertake extensive networking and awareness raising in the area that would not have occurred without the funding. The project developed partly from a recognition that Samaritans had very limited presence in the area with only infrequent outreach from the Inverness branch. It is difficult to see how Samaritans can sustain the networking and awareness raising undertaken by the team in the West Highlands and Skye (or replicate it in other areas where Samaritans has limited presence) without additional funding for staff. Although volunteers could, in theory, take on some networking, the volunteer numbers in the area would not support this at present and moving forward this would require the recruitment of volunteers with the time and skills to take on a networking role. We envisage this work would be different to the outreach work already undertaken by some Samaritans volunteers as the focus would be on meeting organisations and networking rather than public-facing promotion. Continuing to grow volunteer numbers and skills in West Highlands and Skye should therefore remain a priority for Samaritans. We understand the project team will remain with Samaritans throughout 2024, supported by other funding sources, and this will help with the ongoing volunteer recruitment and local networking. It is important that plans are developed during this time on how to sustain the networking and awareness raising work undertaken by the team in West Highlands and Skye.

**Recommendation 2: Samaritans continues to grow volunteer numbers in West Highlands and Skye during 2024.**

**Recommendation 3: Samaritans develops a plan on how to maintain the networking and awareness raising work undertaken by the team.**

#### Learning for Samaritans:

- The project benefitted greatly from the presence of the Project Manager and Assistant in the area and the networking they undertook.
- It is difficult to see how Samaritans can sustain this networking and awareness raising in the West Highlands and Skye (or replicate it in other areas where Samaritans has limited presence) without additional funding.
- Some volunteers could, in theory, take on a networking role although capacity and skills are potential barriers that would need to be considered.

#### Learning for other organisations:

- The presence of on-the-ground staff can be beneficial when seeking to raise awareness and develop services in rural areas.

## Governance

The Project Delivery Plan stated that a Project Advisory Group would be established to ‘provide insight and challenge; generate and test ideas; build ambassadors for the work’. The group was subsequently established with membership consisting of two Samaritans staff members (Executive Director for Scotland and the Project Manager) and four Samaritans volunteers (the Regional Director and Deputy Regional Director for Scotland, and the current and former Inverness Directors). Three of the four volunteer members had been involved in identifying the need for the project and in its development. The Group met quarterly including meetings we observed in June, September and November 2023.

Overall, members of the Advisory Group reported it was a useful part of the project. Staff reported it brought an understanding of Samaritans’ volunteer-led structures and operations, which was particularly useful in thinking about how the learning from the project could be applied elsewhere in the future. Staff also welcomed the experience, knowledge and networks the volunteers brought of the Highlands which included previous experience of outreach in West Highlands and Skye. The volunteer members who had been involved in its development welcomed the opportunity to stay informed on progress, and contribute to discussions where appropriate. Some of the volunteer members reported they had shared information about the project and its progress, gleaned from their membership of the group, among their own networks. Members identified a standalone session on the email volunteer hub, including a presentation from a Samaritans Director, as a highlight.

The Project Advisory Group meetings we observed during 2023 generally consisted of an update on progress from the Project Manager and subsequent discussion on matters arising, although this tended to be limited. The focus was on information sharing and maintaining communications more than decision making or leadership. In the main, members did not feel the focus on information sharing diminished the value of the group although there was a suggestion that a more action-orientated focus would have been more useful. Reflecting on the group’s aims we conclude it did provide some insight and build ambassadors for the work. On the other hand, it did not provide significant challenge or generate and test ideas, in our view.

### Learning for Samaritans:

- Overall, members of the Advisory Group reported it was a useful part of the project which allowed for information sharing between staff and volunteers.
- Members did not feel the focus on information sharing diminished the value of the group although there was a suggestion that a more action-orientated focus would have been more useful.

### 3 Learning and development

This chapter focuses on the learning and development workstream which consisted of a series of training courses and webinars. Learning for Samaritans and other organisations emerging from the workstream is highlighted.

#### Overview

Samaritans delivered a comprehensive learning and development programme in West Highlands and Skye which we highlight as one of the standout elements of the project. The programme consisted of the Conversations with Vulnerable People training course and a series of short webinars on emotional health and suicide. The in-person and online sessions engaged a range of organisations and individuals across the project area. Participants provided very positive feedback on the facilitators, the sessions and their impact. Significantly, this included evidence of applying the learning professionally and personally. The workstream has provided valuable learning for Samaritans and for other organisations involved in planning and delivering learning and development programmes in rural areas. Plans to tailor Samaritans’ self-help app to the West Highlands and Skye were not implemented as the app was withdrawn by Samaritans.

Our assessment of the project’s progress in meeting the short-term outcomes, shown in the theory of change, for this workstream is shown below.

Short-term outcomes	Assessment
Positive feedback on training and webinar sessions from participants	Positive feedback from participant surveys and interviews
Increased awareness of mental ill-health/suicide and sources of support among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers	Evidence of increased awareness from participant surveys and interviews
Increased confidence, behavioural intentions and behavioural change among beneficiaries to support own/others mental ill-health	Some evidence of increased confidence and behaviour change from follow-up interviews
Increased use of Samaritans Scotland and other services among beneficiaries including by lone and isolated workers	No evidence
Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing learning resources for rural areas and lone and isolated workers	Evidence of enhanced understanding from Samaritans staff consultation

#### Training

The main element of this workstream was Samaritans Conversations with Vulnerable People training course. This is a one-day training course that Samaritans developed and has delivered across the UK to ‘equip participants with the skills and confidence to have supportive and effective conversations with vulnerable people’. In the West Highlands and Skye project, the training was delivered on 14 occasions with 105 individuals taking part. The first course was delivered at the end of March 2023 and the most recent at the end of January 2024. The courses were delivered in-person and online by Samaritans experienced sessional trainers.

The course content and delivery in West Highlands and Skye was modified to be relevant to the setting and audience. Tailored scenarios were written and included in the Skills Practice element of the course, so they were relevant to the context of individual organisations, such as Lochalsh and Skye Housing Association and Hope Kitchen. Scenarios were developed after discussions with members of the project team and/or a representative from the organisation, and desktop website searches to better understand the context they are operating in. The draft scenarios were shared with the organisation providing the opportunity for feedback, changes and sign off, prior to delivery. In addition, Samaritans facilitators have conversations with contacts ahead of the delivery date, so they can understand the organisations' context firsthand. These discussions cover the audience, context and expectations. Local imagery and examples were also used during the courses. Flexibility around delivery led to some courses being delivered over two half days, as opposed to one full day, to better fit the needs of some local organisations. Consultees commended the proactive approach adopted by Samaritans Training and Engagement Programme team.

“Before the trainer came I had to fill out a little questionnaire and give some examples of what this would be like in practice. I was glad to be asked so it meant the examples were relevant to us and our work and not about working in social care for instance”. Training course participant.

The courses were a mix of openly advertised and organisation-specific sessions. Individuals from a range of organisations took part in the openly advertised training. This included third sector organisations such as Skye and Lochalsh Mental Health Association, Citizens Advice, and Kinlochleven Community Trust, housing associations such as Lochalsh and Skye Housing Association, public sector organisations such as NHS Highland and Police Scotland, and education providers such as West Highland College. The organisation-specific courses evolved from the networking work undertaken by the project team discussed in chapter 2. These discussions included training needs which Samaritans was able to address with the Conversations with Vulnerable People course. Consultees identified several other ways they had heard about the course including Samaritans adverts/awareness raising, and references to the training in other information sources such as newsletters. Samaritans consultees reflected that the networking and awareness raising through local organisations was more effective than paid for advertising.

The project's focus on lone and isolated workers was evident in the awareness raising process. The project team contacted organisations such as RSABI and Lochaber Chamber of Commerce to raise awareness of the early sessions with lone and isolated workers. A similar approach was adopted for sessions in January 2024. One of these sessions involved management from Caledonian MacBrayne Ferries – a major employer in the area, including lone and isolated workers. Another session, organised with Scottish Union Learning (part of Scottish Trades Union Council) involved a number of union reps with learning responsibilities. The sectors they represented include lone and isolated workers while some of the reps were themselves lone and isolated workers. We are aware that Scottish Union Learning has invited Samaritans to register with their approved training providers list which could lead to further opportunities which unions would pay for. This is potentially, a significant, outcome for the project and Samaritans. Although information on lone and isolated workers from the participant feedback survey was incomplete, it showed the course had attracted a good mix of lone and isolated workers, managers/supervisors

of lone and isolated workers, and those who support lone and isolated people.

Planned training specifically with High Life Highland were offered to employees but did not proceed due to low numbers signing up to the sessions. It was suggested one reason may have been employees being reluctant to take time out of their busy schedule for voluntary training. In place of the training, High Life Highland employees were offered the opportunity to sign up for the project's webinars which were only an hour long.

Participants provided very positive feedback on the Conversations with Vulnerable People training. Key findings from the participant survey are shown below. In total 55 participants completed the survey, a response rate of 52%. Where relevant, comparable figures are provided in brackets from a survey of participants from the Conversations with Vulnerable People courses delivered across the whole of Scotland during 2023. The Scotland-wide survey had 166 respondents and a response rate of 52%.

- 100% agreed/strongly agreed they acquired new skills, techniques and/or perspectives from participation in the course (96% Scotland-wide).
- 100% would recommend the course to others (100% Scotland-wide).
- 98% agreed/strongly agreed the course was a valuable learning experience and a good use of time (98% Scotland-wide).
- 98% agreed/strongly agreed the facilitator provided clear instructions/explanations and communicated the content effectively.
- 95% agreed/strongly agreed they have a better understanding of active listening skills and how to have a conversation with a vulnerable person.
- 95% agreed/strongly agreed the facilitator helped connect the skills and concepts from the course to participants' role.
- 91% agreed/strongly agreed the content of the course was relevant to their role (92% Scotland-wide).
- 89% agreed/strongly agreed the course increased their awareness of emotional health and wellbeing and how to recognise the signs of vulnerability.
- 89% agreed/strongly agreed the course increased their awareness of Samaritans and sources of support.

“The course was structured very well and kept me engaged throughout. I learned a lot throughout and I feel that I will be more confident going in to difficult conversations, thanks to the skills/tools we went through today. The course helped to break it down in to simple, digestible chunks and didn't feel too overwhelming. It also shows what an incredible and difficult job the Samaritans do, which is to be commended... A lot of people mentioned on the training how it was not only really useful for their professional skills development but also for their friends and family”. Training course participant.

Our own consultation confirmed the survey findings. It also provided useful evidence on why participants valued the training so highly and how they had subsequently applied the learning.

“The thing that really resonated about the course was that it has a skills focus. The course is about giving people skills and knowledge that will help them progress and broaden their skillset. It is particularly important in West Highlands where people can have two or three

different jobs... Many people working in the area can be quite isolated in their roles". Training course participant.

"The course has been really helpful for folk who work closely with people who are going through a challenging time. If they are having regular conversations with people who are struggling it is a good way to take a step back and reflect on how best to have those conversations so it is sensitive, potentially productive, and compassionate. And using listening skills so you are not trying to resolve things for that person and not subconsciously traumatising them or re-traumatising them. And to be confident having that conversation with someone in the first place". Training course participant.

"In general the course assisted me on expanding and refreshing previous training with regard to open and closed questioning as well as active listening. The emotional health scale was something completely new to me but I have since utilised it frequently when signposting people to select services. I am more aware they need to be in the right place emotionally to make use of these services in a way which will glean maximum benefit". Training course participant.

The Conversations with Vulnerable People courses in West Highlands and Skye were free to participants. The costs, including the trainers' fees, were covered by the project's funding on a full cost recovery basis. When Samaritans delivers the course elsewhere, the host organisation or individual participants pay. Several consultees from the third sector reported that the courses being free was an important factor in their decision to attend; some reported they would not have attended otherwise.

"It was a massive incentive to do this, the fact that it was funded and free. Pretty much every single person who attended worked for a charity and they just don't have budgets to spend on lots of training... I know this sounds really harsh and it's no reflection on the training but it is highly unlikely we would have attended if it hadn't been free". Training course participant.

One consultee who reported they probably would not have attended if course was not free, said they had changed their view afterwards. They reported they would have "no hesitation" paying for the course as it had been so valuable.

The above experiences suggest, on balance, Samaritans may struggle to sustain the free-to-all training in West Highlands and Skye without funding. It also provides learning for other organisations involved in planning and delivering learning and development programmes in rural areas.

One consultee suggested the free-to-all approach allowed Samaritans to reach a wider audience and deliver a preventative message than may otherwise have been the case. They noted that approaches to organisations such as Samaritans for training such as Conversations with Vulnerable People tend to follow a death by suicide among their workforce. In these circumstances the training is reactionary whereas the approach adopted in the West Highlands and Skye was more preventative. This is potentially significant learning for a range of organisations involved in suicide prevention work.

The project also generated some learning in its attempts to engage the private sector. As noted above, training participants were drawn mainly from the public and third sectors. There were some participants from the private sector and Samaritans is commended for this. However, Samaritans reported that private sector employers had expressed some interest in the training but were reluctant to release staff for a whole day to take part in the training. In addition, consultees who support lone and isolated workers from the private sector suggested additional barriers could include cost (if they had to pay for the training), lost income particularly for the self-employed, not seeing the training as relevant or useful to them or their employees, and difficulties being away from workplaces such as farms. There was a suggestion that a more flexible approach to the length and content of training courses may have been more appealing to organisations including some in the private sector.

The training - and webinars - helped raise the profile of Samaritans in West Highlands and Skye. The adverts and awareness raising undertaken by Samaritans - which would not have taken place without the project - were seen and heard by a far greater number of people than the number who attended the sessions. Those who did attend have a better understanding of the organisation. One consultee suggested it may have helped change people's perceptions of Samaritans to include the provision of training as well as supporting individuals with the listening service. Another consultee suggested the training had helped them understand that Samaritans' listening service was aimed at anyone in emotional distress not just those with suicidal ideation. Consultees who had completed the training also reported that they had recommended it to others. This suggests that more training courses would, in all likelihood, further increase Samaritans profile in the area.

#### Learning for Samaritans:

- Networking and awareness raising by the project team helped promote the training courses and webinars, and was seen as more effective than paid for advertising by some Samaritans consultees.
- Tailoring imagery, examples and content to the local area/participants was welcomed.
- Samaritans may struggle to sustain the free-to-all training in West Highlands and Skye without additional funding as some third sector participants said they would have been unlikely to attend if it had not been free.
- On the other hand, free training could have a role in generating income if organisations follow up on their intention to organise and pay for courses in the future.

#### Learning for Samaritans and other organisations:

- The private sector was more difficult to engage than the public or third sectors. Several reasons were suggested including a reluctance to release staff for a whole day to take part in the training.
- Free-to-all training could have an important role in suicide prevention where it reaches a wider audience than would otherwise be the case.

## Webinars

Samaritans also delivered a series of webinars as part of the West Highlands and Skye project. The series consisted of five webinars which covered: Emotional Health and Wellbeing; Challenging Myths about Suicide; Self-Harm; Staying Resilient; and How to Listen. Each webinar lasted approximately an hour. Samaritans had developed the webinars for use across the UK to provide

a learning and development offering that was more accessible than their training courses. There had been some feedback to Samaritans that organisations and individuals could not commit the time involved in the training sessions. Samaritans had received similar feedback about the Conversations with Vulnerable People course from some organisations in the West Highlands and Skye. In addition, the delivery of webinars in the project was intended to engage community members who may benefit from improving their knowledge around suicide prevention and they were marketed as information sessions not training to ensure clarity around expectation. The contents and delivery of the webinars in West Highlands and Skye were not adapted specifically for the project, other than the inclusion of information to promote the volunteer recruitment campaign.

In total 203 people attended the 10 webinars in West Highlands and Skye. This included 180 people attending 5 openly advertised webinars, and 23 attending 5 webinars specifically for High Life Highland staff. The openly advertised webinars attracted participants from a range of organisations. This included third sector organisations such as Change Mental Health, Lomond and Argyll Advocacy Service, and the Fishermen's Mission, public sector organisations such as NHS Highlands, and learning providers such as University of the Highlands and Islands. The openly advertised sessions attracted an average of 36 participants and this contrasts with the 4 or 5 who attended the High Life Highland webinars. Clearly the openly advertised sessions were more cost effective. However, organisation-specific sessions could still have a role to play in raising awareness and building a relationship with organisations, in our opinion.

Webinar participants provided very positive feedback on the sessions via a survey completed by 32 participants (a response rate of 16%). 100% of the survey respondents reported they would recommend the webinar to others, and 9 out of 10 agreed or strongly agreed that:

- The webinar increased their awareness of emotional health and wellbeing and/or suicide.
- The webinar increased their awareness of Samaritans and sources of support.
- They had a better understanding of the webinar topic i.e. emotional health, suicide, self-harm, resilience or listening.
- Attending the webinar was a valuable use of their time.

“They were a really concise summary of a lot of information”. Webinar participant.

“Very helpful to understand the whole situation that can lead to suicide and how the myths can be dispelled”. Webinar participant.

“I realise that I actually already knew much of the content, gleaned over the years from various sources. However what was very useful was having it presented here, by a great session host, and using it as a refresher and reminder”. Webinar participant.

Samaritans does not have comparable survey data from other webinars delivered elsewhere. The webinars are a relatively new development for Samaritans Training and Engagement Programmes team which have been rolled out in relation to specific requests from organisations. As such, feedback is not gathered in the same way as it is for the training courses.

The West Highlands and Skye webinar survey suggests the webinars engaged lone and isolated people from the project area. It found 39% of survey respondents identified as a lone or isolated



worker, 15% managed lone or isolated workers and 45% support lone or isolated people.

The two webinars we observed were very well delivered by the facilitators and the content was evidence-based and informative. Participants were engaged and contributed via the online chat function. The only criticism we had – and it was minor – was that the content could have been adapted slightly to reflect the project area or at least the rural setting. We are not suggesting significant changes are made but do believe, for example, that some of the images and scenarios used could have been tailored to the setting relatively easily. The recruitment of volunteers was mentioned at the end of the webinars and training. This demonstrates a joined-up approach within the West Highlands and Skye project.

**Recommendation 4: Samaritans seeks to include some relevant imagery and scenarios when delivering webinars in specific areas, or to a specific audience.**

#### Learning for Samaritans:

- The project demonstrated there is demand for Samaritans existing webinar series.
- Openly advertised webinars were more cost effective, however, organisation-specific sessions could still have a role to play in raising awareness and building relationships.

## 4 Volunteering

This chapter focuses on the volunteering workstream and considers recruitment, training, and development of a local hub. Learning for Samaritans and other organisations emerging from the workstream is highlighted.

### Overview

Samaritans used a wide range of local media to promote opportunities to join their email hub volunteer team in the West Highlands and Skye. This led to 14 local people starting volunteer training with Samaritans of whom four have now completed the training and are ready to begin shifts. People with experience of volunteer recruitment in the area described the response as encouraging. Promoting the opportunities as local, using an existing local volunteer in the marketing campaign, and emphasising the ability to work from home were highlighted as important factors that led people to apply. Feedback on Samaritans volunteering training was positive although it was suggested it could have been more tailored to the specific role of email hub volunteer. The figure below summarises, stage by stage, the volunteer recruitment process in the West Highlands and Skye project to date.



Our assessment of the project's progress in meeting the short-term outcomes, shown in the theory of change, for this workstream is shown below.

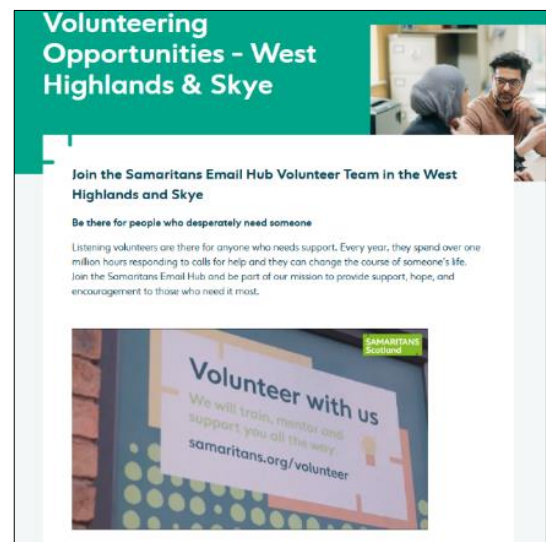
Short-term outcomes	Assessment
Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing volunteering opportunities in rural areas	Evidence of enhanced understanding from Samaritans staff consultation
New volunteers provide positive feedback on training, support and role	Positive feedback on training from new volunteers' consultation
New volunteers feel part of a local team	Negative feedback from new volunteers' consultation
Samaritans benefits from additional local capacity	New volunteers trained and more in training
Samaritans benefits from volunteers understanding of needs and support in rural areas, and among lone and isolated workers	Too early to assess

## Volunteer recruitment

Samaritans volunteers deliver the listening service, answering calls from a network of branches across the UK. Email enquiries were previously responded to by volunteers on shifts within the listening service. In recent years, Samaritans has developed an email hub of volunteers to take on this work. The email hub volunteers are spread across the UK, primarily working from home, with online support from other hub volunteers. One of the drivers of the West Highlands and Skye project was the absence of a branch in the area, with the nearest branch in Inverness. Samaritans considered developing a smaller satellite branch in the project area or creating a virtual branch before deciding to recruit volunteers from the local area who could join the national email hub. In addition, there was a desire to create a togetherness among a local team of volunteers undergoing training at the same time and interacting with each other after the training, if possible.

Samaritans initially promoted the opportunity to join their email hub volunteer team in the West Highlands and Skye during a month long campaign in August 2023 which was towards the end of the project's timescale. There was a strong focus on using local media to promote the opportunities. The breadth of the campaign was impressive covering the following:

- Adverts on local radio – Nevis Radio, Radio Skye, Two Lochs, and Oban FM.
- Reference to the volunteer opportunities during an interview with the Project Manager on Radio Skye.
- Adverts in the local press - Oban Times, Lochaber Life, West Highland Free Press, Skye & Lochalsh Echo, and Dè tha dol?
- Promotion at events attended by the project team including Morven Highland Games, Lochaber Agricultural Show, Oban Pride and Argyll Food Festival.
- Promotion on the West Highlands and Skye project website (see image opposite), Samaritans Scotland X/Twitter, and contributing to Samaritans Scotland and local information and what's on Facebook groups.



The campaign utilised a [video](#) produced specifically for this purpose. It featured a Samaritans volunteer from Skye speaking about their experience and promoting the email hub volunteer team opportunities. A number of consultees commented on the quality of the video and the positive message it promoted.

The August 2023 promotion led to 13 expressions of interest. Information gathered by Samaritans showed people from across West Highlands and Skye had applied. Although numbers were small there was a concentration of applicants from Skye and a lack of applicants from Fort William, despite the two having broadly similar populations (see map opposite). We would encourage Samaritans to reflect on this pattern



as we are not aware of any reason why it occurred. Samaritans information also showed that press and radio advertising had generated most of the enquiries. Six of the 13 people who expressed an interest were interviewed by Samaritans and all were successful. Four of these people have now completed their training and have been handed over ready to begin shifts. Consultees from the area with experience of recruiting volunteers locally reported these figures represented a good response.

Samaritans launched a second promotional campaign in January 2024 to try to recruit more volunteers. This used similar methods to the first campaign, with additional articles such as the one opposite from Highlands Senior Citizens Network February/March 2024 newsletter. In addition, Samaritans increased the duration to two months to try to generate more interest. By mid-March this had generated 15 expressions of interest and 8 successful interviews.

In total there are now 14 people who have been successful at interview, 12 who started training including 8 who are still in training, and four who have completed their training and handed over to begin shifts. At the outset of the project Samaritans had tentatively suggested a target of recruiting 25 new volunteers, however, this was always seen as an aspirational figure as there was no reliable data on which to base an estimate.

**Samaritans Seek Home-based Volunteers living in West Highlands and Skye**

Every 10 seconds, a Samaritans volunteer answers a call for help from someone who may be considering taking their own life.

Our volunteers, based at 19 branches spread across Scotland, come from all walks of life and backgrounds, and are ready and willing to listen, 24/7, 365-days-a-year.

Samaritans' priority is simple - to reduce the number of people who lose their lives to suicide. To do this, we need to reach those who need help most and encourage them to make that potentially life-saving call.

The Highlands region recorded the second highest number of probable suicides in Scotland between 2017 and 2021.

We know that issues of isolation, access to health services and stigma can often make seeking help and support challenging in a rural area. We also recognise that the geography of the Highlands and the nature of many key industries – such as tourism and aquaculture – can create issues of isolation and connection.

For anyone struggling to cope, a trained Samaritans volunteer can provide a listening ear and really valuable support. Our 24-hour helpline and email service can help, whatever someone is going through, at any time.

We are currently recruiting for home-based volunteers living in the West Highlands and Skye area for our Email Hub (from Oban to Ullapool and Skye).


Email Hub volunteers will be part of the Samaritans volunteer pool and respond to calls for help from throughout the UK via email. Excellent training and support will be provided and, although the role is remote, you will be part of a team.

Email Hub volunteer Gavin, from Portree, said: "The training is excellent, it's very supportive.

"Volunteering for the Samaritans Email Hub is worth the effort you put into it. It's a group of like-minded, incredibly supportive individuals. And it fulfils a role in my life that I didn't have otherwise."

For more information visit [www.samaritans.org/highlands-training](http://www.samaritans.org/highlands-training) or email [highlands@samaritans.org](mailto:highlands@samaritans.org)

*If you need to talk, any time day or night, just call 116 123 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)*



Volunteer recruitment in West Highlands and Skye compares favourably to Samaritans experience elsewhere. Half of the local people who expressed an interest progressed to the interview stage compared to approximately 40% in the recruitment of volunteers for the hubs and branches managed by Samaritans Volunteer Recruitment Team. The team suggested this may reflect the fact that applicants during the second phase of recruitment in the project area were contacted by telephone within 24 hours. The team added that by acknowledging applications quickly and having an individual conversation they had been able to retain interest, provide all the information applicants needed, and offer them an interview. It was also noted that all of those interviewed in West Highlands and Skye were successful and offered a training place compared to approximately 90% elsewhere.

The local volunteers we spoke with during this evaluation provided some interesting insight into their reasons for volunteering, feedback on the interview and training, and barriers to volunteering. Samaritans will find it very useful to know that branding the opportunities as West Highland and Skye was a key driver for one of the volunteers. The importance of the video featuring a local person and the flexibility offered working from home to respond to emails were also highlighted.

“I was looking for a volunteering opportunity that I was able to fit around my work. I saw this opportunity and thought that would be interesting. Particularly the fact it was packaged up as West Highlands and Skye, so I felt it was something local. I think if I’d just seen an advert for volunteering with Samaritans it wouldn’t have crossed my mind to apply for it. The fact it had a local connection. And then I watched the video and I recognised the guy who was doing it and that made me feel some connection to it... For me it made a big difference branding it as West Highlands and Skye”. Volunteer.

“I’d been thinking about volunteering with Samaritans already but the nearest call centre is Inverness and that’s too far for me to travel. I saw about the West Highlands project – it was an advert in a magazine we get here locally. That’s how I knew there was something that wasn’t based in Inverness and I could do remotely”. Volunteer.

The volunteering workstream aimed to increase the number of volunteers in West Highlands and Skye. Samaritans was not able to provide a baseline figure for the number of volunteers in the area at the outset. This was the result of the way the organisation records information – while the postcodes of people enquiring about volunteering are recorded, it is not recorded for those who subsequently progress to training and then active volunteering. Samaritans consultees agreed that the number of volunteers at the outset was low and potentially limited to the volunteer from Skye who features in the video and a second person from another part of the project area. Samaritans did record information on the volunteer recruitment during the project and this has been useful for this evaluation. Samaritans would benefit, in our view, from applying the same level of record keeping to volunteer recruitment across the organisation. Samaritans would also benefit, in our view, from recording equalities information on volunteers. At the outset of the project, the volunteer workstream had a specific focus on EDI – equalities, diversity and inclusion – and this was incorporated into the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan. The information was not however gathered by Samaritans during the project.

**Recommendation 5: Samaritans gathers the area of residence and equalities information at recruitment, training and active volunteering stages.**

One of the volunteers highlighted the potential challenges that exist in recruiting volunteers in remote rural areas that rely on satellite broadband which could be adversely affected by poor weather. They reported that there had been occasions when they lost connection during the three-hour training sessions. They also reported this was a barrier to signing up for volunteering shifts as they did not have confidence their broadband would stay connected throughout the shift. Although the volunteer is trying to find a solution their experience will be of interest to Samaritans as they seek to recruit more volunteers in rural areas.

#### Learning for Samaritans and other organisations:

- A wide range of local media were used to promote the volunteering opportunities which generated interest that consultees with experience of volunteer recruitment in the area described as encouraging.
- Branding the opportunities as West Highland and Skye, using a local volunteer in the promotional video, and emphasising the ability to work from home were important factors that led people to apply.
- Email hub volunteers in rural areas can face challenges with broadband connectivity that

can affect their engagement in online training sessions or shifts.

- Gathering equalities information is essential when assessing initiatives to increase the diversity of volunteers.

### **Volunteer interview and training**

Samaritans has a comprehensive training programme that all new volunteers must complete before they join a branch or the email hub. The initial training programme consists of seven three-hour long sessions.

The new recruits from the West Highlands and Skye consulted during this evaluation provided very positive feedback on the interview and training process. They reported the interview was straightforward and a useful opportunity to discuss the volunteering opportunity in more detail. They reported the training content was very thorough and the facilitators were excellent. They noted that the training was “intense” but very useful and rewarding. They also highlighted the training was focused on the telephone-based listening service with only one of the seven sessions dedicated to the email hub. They suggested the training could have been more tailored to their intended role as email hub volunteers who would not be answering telephones. We understand one tranche of the training was delivered entirely for email hub volunteers (from across the UK) which leads us to suggest that Samaritans should consider a more flexible approach to training email hub volunteers.

**Recommendation 6: Samaritans should consider a more flexible approach to training email hub volunteers.**

Learning for Samaritans:

- Samaritans volunteer training was described as very thorough and rewarding.
- The training could have been more tailored to the email hub volunteer role.

### **Development of a local volunteer hub**

The newly recruited volunteers in West Highlands and Skye shared a sense of disappointment at the lack of interaction with other volunteers from the area. They pointed out they were attracted to the role as Samaritans had given the impression there would be a West Highlands and Skye volunteer hub.

“Following the advert in the local paper, I got the impression there would be a group of us going through the training. So therefore, you’d form a group. Obviously, you might be working on different shifts but there would be some kind of connection that we could have. That seems to me to follow on from the idea that they were creating this hub. Later on in the training I realised this was a marketing thing, it doesn’t really exist. In the early training they said we could join a WhatsApp group with the others but I thought what’s the point I’m not going to be working with them. Since then I haven’t really seen anything else about it (connecting with other local volunteers)”. Volunteer.

“The advert said the West Highlands hub. I thought it was going to be that. It would be good to be in touch with other people locally, and have that connection... Being up here,

we are quite isolated and I am keen to connect with other people who are here. The advert did lead you to think there would be a hub". Volunteer.

This feedback supports Samaritans initial intention to create a local team or hub of volunteers. The idea of a hub was a factor in attracting volunteers locally and is something they would still welcome. We understand Samaritans planned to put all recruited volunteers through the same training course, however, due to the low numbers initially recruited and differing times of when volunteers could start this was not possible. Moving forward, we recommend Samaritans identifies a member of staff (or local volunteer if that is not possible) to develop and implement a plan to create a West Highlands and Skye volunteer hub with opportunities for the members to communicate and support each other, online and, if possible, in-person. New volunteers should be connected to the local hub at the start of their training to provide opportunities for local support. We appreciate Samaritans fully supports its email hub volunteers during their shifts. Given the focus of the project was to support lone and isolated workers in West Highlands and Skye, it could be argued that Samaritans should set a good example by providing opportunities for its own volunteers to connect and support others fulfilling the same role locally outwith these shifts.

**Recommendation 7: Samaritans identifies a member of staff (or local volunteer if that is not possible) to develop and implement a plan to create a West Highlands and Skye volunteer hub with opportunities for the members to communicate and support each other, online and, if possible, in-person.**

#### Learning for Samaritans:

- The concept of joining a local team or hub was appealing to newly recruited volunteers in the West Highlands and Skye and one of the reasons they applied. This is likely to be equally important to potential new recruits in other rural areas that have no physical branch.

## 5 Communications and marketing

This section assesses the communication and marketing workstream of the West Highlands and Skye project. Learning for Samaritans and other organisations emerging from the workstream is highlighted.

### Overview

Samaritans delivered a multi-faceted communication and marketing campaign tailored to the West Highlands and Skye which prioritised local media. The activity helped raise awareness of Samaritans and the support they provide, as well as promoting the training and volunteering elements of the project. Significantly, the added value of the campaign was deemed to be high as in the absence of the project, marketing would have been limited to Samaritans generic Scotland-wide activity.

Our assessment of the project’s progress in meeting the short-term outcomes, shown in the theory of change, for this workstream is shown below.

Short-term outcomes	Assessment
Increased awareness and reduced stigma of mental ill-health/suicide and sources of support among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers	No evidence among community
Increased awareness and engagement with Samaritans Scotland and other services among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers	Anecdotal evidence of increased awareness from consultees
Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing comms and marketing for rural areas and lone and isolated workers	Evidence of enhanced understanding from Samaritans staff consultation

### Communications and marketing activity

The project’s communications and marketing benefitted from the market research undertaken in 2022. This work provided useful findings on how to effectively communicate with audiences in West Highlands and Skye which emphasised the use of local messaging and media. This led to activity that was tailored to the local community. As well as using the name Samaritans Scotland (rather than Samaritans) the communications content used local voices and imagery wherever possible and was delivered predominantly through local and hyperlocal media. The communications and marketing activity undertaken during 2023-24 included:

- Development of the West Highlands and Skye [project website](#).
- Promotion and celebration of activities on Samaritans Scotland’s X/Twitter account.
- Adverts on local radio – Nevis Radio, Radio Skye, Two Lochs, and Oban FM.
- Interviews with the Project Manager on Nevis Radio and Radio Syke.
- Adverts in the local press such as West





- Highland Free Press, Oban Times, Lochaber Life, Skye & Lochalsh Echo.
- Adverts in smaller community-based publications such as Dè tha dol? in the communities of Ardgour, Ardnamurchan, Moidart, Morvern and Sunart.
- Distributing 5,000 Samaritans Scotland bookmarks through High Life Highland's local and mobile libraries.
- A social media campaign with the Scottish Farmer in collaboration with RSABI.
- Pitch side banners at three local shinty clubs.
- Promotion at events attended by the project team including Skye Half Marathon, Morven Highland Games, Lochaber Agricultural Show, Oban Pride and Argyll Food Festival.

Samaritans consultees regarded the local and hyperlocal approach as an effective way to reach the target audience in the West Highlands and Skye. It was also seen as a cost-effective approach. Local networking such as attending events tended to be free and the cost of local press and radio was considerably less than Scotland or UK-wide outlets.

Samaritans produced a small number of videos in mid-2023 as part of the communications and marketing activity. The videos feature local people and seek to portray different stories. For example, one [video](#) shares one person's personal experience and jointly promotes Samaritans and a local mental health and wellbeing charity, Ewen's Room. Another [video](#) is from an employer's perspective and emphasises the importance of mental wellbeing among employees as well as promoting Samaritans. The content and overall quality of these videos, and the video promoting the volunteering opportunity, is excellent, in our view. Consultees who had seen the videos also commented on how powerful the video messages were and how well they used local people and images from the West Highlands and Skye. It is disappointing that more use has not been made of these videos to date, although we understand Samaritans Scotland has a plan that will be implemented in the coming months including a social media campaign during March 2024. Ideally it would have been beneficial if this plan had been developed and implemented earlier to maximise impact on all aspects of the project.

The project was also featured in the August 2023 edition of Third Force News. The article is shown in figure 1. Third Force News is published by Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and is one of the main sources for news and information regarding Scotland's third sector.

As noted in chapters 3 and 4, Samaritans ran marketing campaigns to promote the project's training and volunteering opportunities. These campaigns used many of the above media.



As noted in chapter 2, we also highlight the importance of networking by the project team in terms of awareness raising. Although this was not part of the communications and marketing activity, it was complementary and helped raise the project’s profile with stakeholders in the public and third sectors.

**Learning for Samaritans and other organisations:**

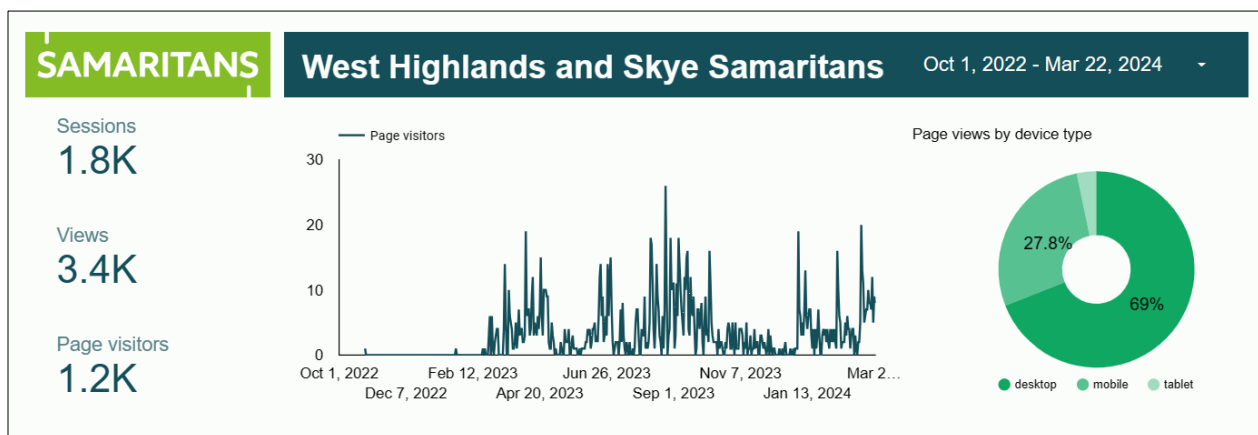
- Building on market research at the outset of the project, Samaritans prioritised the use of local media to promote the West Highlands and Skye project. This included the use of community-based media.
- Local voices and imagery were used to good effect in the communications and marketing campaign.
- Videos were produced which contained powerful messages but Samaritans was initially unsure how to showcase the content.

**Reach and impact**

It has not been possible to fully assess the reach or impact of the project’s communications and marketing campaign during this evaluation. The availability of robust quantitative evidence was the main issue, as discussed below. Samaritans could, potentially, have gathered evidence on reach and impact via a population survey however this would not have been cost effective, in our view, and we do not therefore recommend their use.

**Recommendation 8: Samaritans does not use population surveys to assess the reach and impact of project-based communications and marketing activity, on the grounds of cost effectiveness.**

Information on the numbers reached by the print and radio marketing was not readily available. Some evidence was available for the project website and X/Twitter. Our review of a sample of posts on Samaritans Scotland’s X/Twitter account showed a tweet on 18 August 2023 promoting the webinars has 991 views, a tweet on 31 August 2023 about the volunteering opportunities has 773 views, and a tweet on 3 September 2023 about the project team attending Oban Pride has 1,510 views. Samaritans provided useful data on the project website during the period 1 October 2022 to 22 March 2024. The headline figures show there were 1,158 people (page visitors) who visited the project webpages on 1,832 occasions (sessions) and during these visits the project webpages were viewed 3,372 times in total. The statistics also show the number of page visitors varied during the period and that approximately two thirds of views were made from PCs.



It has not been possible to assess whether the awareness raising had an impact on help seeking behaviour in the West Highlands and Skye. The vast majority of calls to Samaritans telephone helpline are made from mobile phones which cannot be geo-located. Similarly the location of email enquiries is not routinely gathered.

It has also not been possible to examine the reach or impact specifically on lone and isolated workers. It was clear that Samaritans made a concerted effort to reach the group by using a range of local media as well as specific activities such as the Scottish Farmer social media campaign and the article in Highlands Senior Citizens Network newsletter. We therefore conclude that Samaritans took reasonable steps to raise its profile and increase awareness of its support among lone and isolated workers in West Highlands and Skye.

In the absence of quantitative data, it was useful to note that the majority of consultees who live or work in the area believed the project's marketing and communications had a positive effect. They reported it had helped raise Samaritans profile as a source of help, and raised awareness of the training and volunteering opportunities.

**Learning for Samaritans and other organisations:**

- Assessing the reach and impact of the project's communications and marketing activity was challenging to both Samaritans and the external evaluators.
- A population survey could generate some evidence however, the cost of doing so would be prohibitive, in our opinion.

## 6 Research

This section focuses on the research workstream. Our assessment is hindered by the delayed commissioning of the research. Learning for Samaritans and other organisations emerging from the workstream is highlighted.

Our assessment of the project’s progress in meeting the short-term outcomes, shown in the theory of change, for this workstream is shown below.

Short-term outcomes	Assessment
Research participants provide positive feedback on involvement and impact	No evidence
Increased awareness among Samaritans staff / volunteers of mental ill-health and protective factors in rural areas, and among lone and isolated workers	Too early to assess
Recommendations to changes to Samaritans Scotland and other services informed by research	Too early to assess

The workstream set out to commission primary research into protective factors for suicide, self-harm and mental wellbeing among lone and isolated workers which will help to inform improvements in intervention and support. Samaritans circulated the brief through relevant networks and directly to rural researchers in February 2023. However, there was very limited interest in the research opportunity with only one bid submitted. Reflecting on why this may have been the case, we would suggest the pool of potential bidders with relevant skills and experience would have been relatively small given the very specific focus of the research. The location of the fieldwork could also have been a barrier for some researchers. On the other hand, the budget appeared to be appropriate for the research proposed and the bidding timescale was not restrictive (with a month available from the date the brief was first advertised to the submission date). Samaritans reported that some potential bidders gave feedback to them that they were interested in the research but did not have the capacity to bid at that time.

To progress matters, Samaritans commissioned the researcher who had responded to the initial brief to undertake the stakeholder engagement element of the research. SRUC - Scotland’s Rural College – was one of those engaged in this process and they expressed an interest in the planned primary research. Samaritans subsequently commissioned SRUC to undertake a literature review and primary research on the protective factors in lone and isolated workers in the West Highlands and Skye, and in rural Scotland in general.

SRUC published the literature review findings in June 2023. The report concluded that “literature in relation to protective factors for suicide illustrates a complex and nuanced picture for lone workers in Skye and the West Highlands”. It also recommended that the next stage of the research should aim to capture “the lived experience of a wide sample of individuals i.e. those who are and are not at risk or who are or are not vulnerable”. Taking forward this aim, SRUC consulted with a wide range of lone and isolated workers across West Highlands and Skye during autumn 2023. In total, SRUC conducted semi-structured interviews with 38 participants. The participants were either lone workers or employers of lone workers. The findings of the research had not been

published at the time this evaluation report was produced. However, SRUC did share some preliminary findings with Samaritans in late January 2024. They shared some powerful findings which supported the complex and nuanced picture previously identified in the literature review. It was noteworthy that Samaritans had invited SAMH – Scottish Association for Mental Health to this session. This reflected an evolving relationship between the two organisations which stems from SAMH’s lead role in implementing aspects of [Creating Hope Together Scotland’s Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2022-2025](#) which makes references to the West Highlands and Skye Project.

SRUC has gathered a substantial body of evidence which they are currently analysing and reporting on. The onus will then be on Samaritans to interpret the findings and use them to inform their own services in West Highlands and Skye, and other areas where they may apply. Equally, the findings will be of interest to the Scottish Government and other organisations with an interest in suicide prevention such as SAMH, and they too will have a role in applying the learning from SRUC’s research.

**Learning for Samaritans and other organisations:**

- Commissioning primary research on emotional distress and suicide in rural areas can be a challenge even when the budget and bidding timescale appear to be appropriate.
- Samaritans was proactive in the way they addressed the issue and this approach may be productive in other settings.

## 7 Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, this evaluation has demonstrated the West Highlands and Skye project had a positive impact on its aim to raise awareness and increase engagement in the range of Samaritans services and support opportunities in the area. The impact was, however, diminished somewhat by the challenges Samaritans and the project faced during 2021 and 2022 which shortened the project's delivery time. The appointment of the second Project Manager in January 2023 provided impetus and the impact made since then has been noteworthy.

The project's four workstreams have all contributed, to some extent, to raising awareness of Samaritans and their services in the area. The communications and marketing campaign did so directly and effectively through the use of a wide range of local and hyperlocal media. Promotion of the email hub volunteer opportunities also raised awareness of Samaritans, and importantly their local presence. Promotion of the training and webinars also helped raise and broaden awareness that Samaritans' services included training as well as the listening service that is synonymous with the organisation. The research has raised awareness among those who have been approached and participated in it to date, with a greater impact expected when the findings are published and promoted in the near future. The impact of the Project Manager and Assistant in raising awareness of Samaritans was significant and should not be overlooked. Their networking with individual organisations and multi-agency groups was extensive. The size of the West Highlands and Skye means there are many more opportunities for further networking and awareness raising. There are also opportunities to build on the relationships established to date as several consultees expressed a desire to continue to work with Samaritans in the future. Samaritans decision to extend the project team's employment into 2024/25 with other funding sources should provide the resources needed to continue this valuable networking and awareness raising work.

As well as raising awareness of Samaritans and their services, the training and webinars had a positive impact on the skills and knowledge of those who attended. In total 105 people attended the training sessions and 203 attended the webinars from a wide range of public, private and third sector organisations. Feedback demonstrated participants had a better understanding of emotional health and suicide, and had acquired new skills and techniques to help other people and themselves when facing emotional distress. Significantly, the evaluation also established that participants had subsequently applied their learning to their professional and personal lives. We highlighted the training and webinar as one of the standout aspects of the project. Although the free-to-all model will be difficult to replicate without additional funding there was also evidence that some organisations were interested in future collaborations that could generate income for Samaritans.

The impact of the communications and marketing campaign has been difficult to assess. The project aimed to reduce stigma, encourage help seeking behaviour and increase signposting to local and national support. Samaritans does not routinely gather information on how people heard about their services and our attempts to reach individuals from the area who had done so did not generate any interest. There was however a strong view among consultees that Samaritans awareness raising would have impacted in the ways envisaged. The use of local and hyperlocal media ensured the message was very specifically targeted on the West Highlands and Skye. It

should also be noted that the added value of the communications and marketing activity was very high as Samaritans generic marketing would have been the only activity taking place in the area without the project. Samaritans plans to, somewhat belatedly, use the videos produced during the project are welcomed. The videos feature local people and employers and provide a powerful message that should resonate with the local population.

The volunteering workstream has, after a delayed start, led to the recruitment of new email hub volunteers from the West Highlands and Skye. In total 14 people have been successful at interview, 12 have started training including four who have completed their training and been handed over to begin shifts. None of the new volunteers had actually started a shift with Samaritans by mid-March 2024, near the original end date of the project. At the start of the project the number of local volunteers was unknown but may have been limited to two volunteers including one who featured in the excellent volunteer recruitment video produced during the project. Consultees with experience of volunteer recruitment in the area suggested the recruitment figures are encouraging. The evaluation established that promoting the volunteer opportunities as part of Samaritans West Highlands and Skye project was important, as was the opportunity to work from home. Being part of a local hub or team of other volunteers from the area was also important. To date the new volunteers have not had an opportunity to interact with each other either online or in-person. It is incumbent upon Samaritans to deliver on this aspect of the workstream, in our view, as it was part of the reason people were attracted to the role and given the project's focus on supporting lone and isolated workers in the area. It has not been possible to assess the project's success in attracting a diverse group of volunteers as equalities information has not been gathered by Samaritans. Feedback that the volunteer training could have been more tailored to the role of email hub volunteer was noted. Overall, the project showed that Samaritans could be flexible and tailored delivery to the needs of the project and the area. Volunteer training and developing a local hub were, however, examples of how the organisation could be a little inflexible at times. Other examples were highlighted such as equalities monitoring, the length and content of training courses, and the initial approach to marketing.

The focus on lone and isolated workers decreased over the life of the project. At the outset, there was a strong focus on this target group as society re-adjusted to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the project progressed, Samaritans applied a broader focus on people who were experiencing or at risk of emotional distress, or lone and isolated people, in the area. With some justification, Samaritans felt that maintaining a strict focus on lone and isolated workers could have excluded people who may have benefitted from the project. As a result the evaluation has focused less on the impact on lone and isolated people than we envisaged at the outset.

The evaluation included a requirement to assess the project's adherence/alignment to the underpinning principles of delivery. It is our view that there was strong alignment with these principles although they were not explicitly referenced in documents or discussions during the project. Nonetheless, there was strong evidence of alignment. Samaritans staff and volunteers worked as one on the Project Advisory Group. The market research at the outset and the ongoing networking by the project team ensured the views of local communities helped shape the project. The team worked in partnership with a wide range of local agencies and community groups in developing and delivering the training and webinars. The communications and marketing was tailored to the area and was responsive to diversity within both geographic communities and communities of interest, and had a focus on the hyperlocal. There was a collaborative focus on

learning together and demonstrating impact across the workstreams, although there were also challenges in evidencing the impact. Finally, the project has generated learning that is relevant to the West Highlands and Skye, Samaritans as an organisation, and Scotland’s wider suicide prevention work. This learning has been highlighted throughout this evaluation.

The evaluation demonstrated that six of the short-term outcomes shown in the theory of change have been achieved in full, three have been partially achieved, and one has not been achieved. There was no evidence or it was too soon to assess the other six short-term outcomes. As such it is difficult to fully assess the intermediate outcomes, at this stage. We are nonetheless confident that the project has contributed towards positively these intermediate outcomes.

Work-stream	Short-term outcomes	Intermediate outcomes
L&D	Positive feedback on training and webinar sessions from participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lone and isolated workers in the West Highlands and Skye feel well-resourced and confident to speak about, and seek help around, emotional health and wellbeing and suicidal thoughts</li> <li>• Lone and isolated workers, their employers and their community supporters know where to find help and support to improve emotional health and wellbeing and/or reduce distress</li> <li>• Samaritans is recognised, nationally and locally, as providing effective, innovative solutions to emotional health and wellbeing improvement and suicide prevention in a remote region of high risk</li> <li>• Samaritans increases its reach and builds a sustainable, diverse local presence through partnership with people, employers and other agencies</li> </ul>
L&D	Increased awareness of mental ill-health/suicide and sources of support among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers	
L&D	Increased confidence, behavioural intentions and behavioural change among beneficiaries to support own/others mental ill-health	
L&D	Increased use of Samaritans Scotland and other services among beneficiaries including by lone and isolated workers	
L&D	Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing learning resources for rural areas and lone and isolated workers	
V	Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing volunteering opportunities in rural areas	
V	New volunteers provide positive feedback on training, support and role	
V	New volunteers feel part of a local team	
V	Samaritans benefits from additional local capacity	
V	Samaritans benefits from volunteers understanding of needs and support in rural areas, and among lone and isolated workers	
C&M	Increased awareness and reduced stigma of mental ill-health/suicide and sources of support among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers	
C&M	Increased awareness and engagement with Samaritans Scotland and other services among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers	
C&M	Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing comms and marketing for rural areas and lone and isolated workers	
R	Research participants provide positive feedback on involvement and impact	
R	Increased awareness among Samaritans staff/volunteers of mental ill-health and protective factors in rural areas, and among lone and isolated worker	
R	Recommendations to changes to Samaritans Scotland and other services informed by research	

This report contains a number of recommendations. For ease of reference they are reproduced below:

- 1 Samaritans contacts a wide range of public and third sector organisations in the area to update them on progress to date and on future plans, as well as seeking to generate leads that could be developed further.
- 2 Samaritans continues to grow volunteer numbers in West Highlands and Skye during 2024.
- 3 Samaritans develops a plan on how to maintain the networking and awareness raising work undertaken by the team.
- 4 Samaritans seeks to include relevant imagery and scenarios when delivering



webinars in specific areas, or to a specific audience.

- 5 Samaritans gathers the area of residence and equalities information at recruitment, training and active volunteering stages.
- 6 Samaritans should consider a more flexible approach to training email hub volunteers.
- 7 Samaritans identifies a member of staff (or local volunteer if that is not possible) to develop and implement a plan to create a West Highlands and Skye volunteer hub with opportunities for the members to communicate and support each other, online and, if possible, in-person.
- 8 Samaritans does not use population surveys to assess the reach and impact of project-based communications and marketing activity, on the grounds of cost effectiveness.

In addition, we make a final recommendation that Samaritans organises an internal workshop to discuss the findings contained in this report and their implications. We suggest this is facilitated by the Executive Director for Scotland, and includes the project team, workstream leads, Regional Director for Scotland, and senior Samaritans staff with responsibilities for learning and development, service expansion, volunteering, communications and marketing, and research.

In conclusion, West Highlands and Skye project has helped raise awareness and increase engagement in the range of Samaritans services and support opportunities in the area. The shortened delivery timescale and the ongoing needs of the area, mean there is considerable scope to continue the project's work in the West Highlands and Skye.

## Appendix – Theory of change

Theme	Activity	Outputs	Short-term outcomes	Intermediate outcomes	Impact
Comms and marketing	Samaritans services and resources, and that of partner agencies, are promoted proactively to lone and isolated workers in the West Highlands and Skye  Samaritans works with local people to support behaviour change around help seeking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Materials produced</li> <li>Marketing activity including interviews, events, adverts, and social media</li> <li>Numbers and characteristics of those reached by campaign</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increased awareness and reduced stigma of mental ill-health/suicide and sources of support among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers</li> <li>Increased awareness and engagement with Samaritans Scotland and other services among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers</li> <li>Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing comms and marketing for rural areas and lone and isolated workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lone and isolated workers in the West Highlands and Skye feel well-resourced and confident to speak about, and seek help around, emotional health and wellbeing and suicidal thoughts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improved mental health and wellbeing</li> <li>Fewer people die by suicide in the Highlands</li> </ul>
Learning and Development	Samaritans brings its training expertise on talking about suicide and supporting wellbeing to employers of lone and isolated workers, workers themselves and the communities supporting them in the West Highlands and Skye	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bespoke training and webinar material developed</li> <li>Number of training sessions and webinars delivered with attendance figures and characteristics including lone and isolated workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Positive feedback on training and webinar sessions from participants</li> <li>Increased awareness of mental ill-health/suicide and sources of support among beneficiaries including lone and isolated workers</li> <li>Increased confidence, behavioural intentions and behavioural change among beneficiaries to support own/others mental ill-health</li> <li>Increased use of Samaritans Scotland and other services among beneficiaries including by lone and isolated workers</li> <li>Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing learning resources for rural areas and lone and isolated workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lone and isolated workers, their employers and their community supporters know where to find help and support to improve emotional health and wellbeing and/or reduce distress</li> <li>Samaritans is recognised, nationally and locally, as providing effective, innovative solutions to emotional health and wellbeing improvement and suicide prevention in a remote region of high risk</li> </ul>	
Research	The voices of lone and isolated workers, their employers and the communities which support them inform an evidence-based approach to improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Numbers and characteristics of those engaging in research</li> <li>Research findings produced and disseminated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research participants provide positive feedback on involvement and impact</li> <li>Increased awareness among Samaritans staff / volunteers of mental ill-health and protective factors in rural areas, and among lone and isolated workers</li> <li>Recommendations to changes to Samaritans Scotland and other services informed by research</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Samaritans increases its reach and builds a sustainable, diverse local presence through partnership with people, employers and other agencies</li> </ul>	
Volunteering and EDI	Samaritans increases its service capabilities and diversity by recruiting and training written word volunteers from West Highlands and Skye – providing added local benefit by creating a diverse volunteer community among those in isolated work with support from partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number and characteristics of new volunteers</li> <li>Volunteer training and development sessions delivered</li> <li>Activities undertaken by new volunteers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhanced understanding among Samaritans staff of developing volunteering opportunities in rural areas</li> <li>New volunteers provide positive feedback on training, support and role</li> <li>New volunteers feel part of a local team</li> <li>Samaritans benefits from additional local capacity</li> <li>Samaritans benefits from volunteers understanding of needs and support in rural areas, and among lone and isolated workers</li> </ul>		