



DIGITAL FUTURES

Consultation findings

Funded by

Claire

The Claire Squires Fund

SAMARITANS

Foreword

When crisis strikes, many of us turn to social media, to seek solace, to articulate our distress, to look for help, or, sometimes, just to say goodbye. In those brief, often chaotic hours, there are fleeting opportunities to connect with people whose lives are in grave danger.

I am one of the lucky ones. When, in my despair, I cried out online, a friend reached out from another continent and intervened. If it were not for her help, I do not believe that I would be in a position to write this foreword.

Life is so fragile and terribly precious, and the online environment can offer an enormous opportunity for people to help each other. For all those who are isolated by circumstances, whose support networks have failed, and for whom social media is a source of support or a last resort.

Mark

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This report provides the findings of Samaritans' Digital Futures project. This was a six month knowledge and learning project which aimed to put our users experience at the centre of our digital development work. This is the start of a journey for Samaritans in terms of changing how we meaningfully engage people who use our services in the development process of new projects, as well as how we evolve and adapt to the changing world in which we operate.

Introduction

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

Alongside the work we at Samaritans currently do and will continue to do, we need to ensure that our services are available to people online, that people who are struggling to cope are more likely to receive the right support, that the impact of harmful online content is minimised, and that people can contact us in a way they feel most comfortable with, using the technology that they use in their day to day lives.

"Vulnerable people online are recognised, offered support and have less chance of coming into contact with harmful online content."

(Objective from Samaritans Strategy, 2015-21)

The ultimate purpose of our digital development work is to reduce suicide by:

- Improving chances that distressed people online access information and support.
- Working with others to reduce the impact of harmful online content, including Samaritans contact details being available through search engine results on related topics.
- Exploring ways that Samaritans can provide emotional support online.
- Enabling Samaritans to reach the widest possible population of people who are struggling to cope.

Digital Futures

Digital Futures (DF) was a project to find out people's views on the opportunities and challenges for emotional support and suicide reduction presented by the online environment.

This was the first time Samaritans had undertaken a public consultation on this scale and our aim was to make sure we listened to, and understood, people's thoughts and experiences. This report is a summary of what we heard.

What did we do?

The consultation consisted of three streams (see Appendix A) and a number of different methodologies to ensure people were able to contribute in a way in which they felt comfortable.

The streams reflected groups of people with different personal and professional experiences however these were not mutually exclusive groups and people were able to take part in multiple streams.



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

Digital influencers

Digital Futures actively targeted those who have engaged with Samaritans online work in the past inviting them to take a role of critical friend. These people were contacted directly and asked if and how they would like to take part.

There was a mixed response however most were supportive. A number of these people participated in the consultation in both the public and professional sector streams and many followed it on social media and helped to promote opportunities to get involved.

Findings

This section summarises the views and experiences expressed by the people who took part in Digital Futures. The report is structured by stream to reflect the input of the different groups whilst also highlighting areas where there was consensus in opinion.

Public consultation stream

Independent research by Truth Consulting

The following is a summary, written by the researchers at Truth Consulting:

As part of the user consultation, Truth, an independent research agency, conducted targeted research with people who have experienced seeking help for themselves or others online. This research explored end-users' perceptions of what good online services could look like – and processes whereby people could effectively be supported in the online environment. Respondents were generally very warm to the concept of developing online services, as the following quote illustrates:

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

A caveat to the findings is that people were recruited because they had experience of seeking help online, and were digitally literate. However this is exactly the audience such services would be aimed at. People who took part recognised that digital support is not necessarily appropriate for everyone, or a replacement for other types of support. The full report from the Truth research is available separately. In terms of the value of online services and interactions, the findings mirror those from other strands of the consultation reported in other sections and so are not repeated here.

The following provides a brief summary of the research findings focusing on personal experiences and opportunities for the future development of online services relevant for Samaritans:

a) Positive user experiences

People who took part in the research described multiple ways in which they have engaged with the online environment as part of their help-seeking behaviour. This includes seeking out helpful content (advice and information) connecting with other people online (usually via social media), and being able to express how they feel (e.g. via blogs, forums and social media such as Facebook). It was clear that, at least for those taking part in the research, that the online environment can be hugely important for reducing social isolation. One person gave an example of watching television programmes and being able to comment on them with others on social media, as an important way to feel more connected to everyday life and reduce isolation.

The ability to find and communicate with other people who have struggled to cope was also described as cathartic and particularly supportive. There can be a reluctance to 'burden' family or friends, or a sense of not being understood by people who haven't experienced it themselves, and the reach afforded by the online environment provided

contact with new people who had ‘gone through the same thing’. The potential for anonymity online is particularly important in this respect, at least when making initial contact with others and being comfortable expressing personal experiences and emotions.

Anonymity is not always necessary however – those taking part in the research also provided examples of people they knew offline reaching out to them directly after they posted how they were feeling online. This expression of concern ‘brought them back from the edge’ of suicide, and they believe saved their life.

So people with direct experience of struggling to cope and seeking help online emphasised how the online environment represents a locus of support in itself, and also a communication channel that provides the opportunity to identify and reach out when someone is in need.

b) Negative user experiences

People who took part in the research also described negative experiences of seeking help online. Some had experienced trolling, bullying, and had viewed upsetting, suicide-supportive content. However this was fairly rare. Other unhelpful experiences tended to be less serious – but when someone is in need, still hugely impactful. When struggling to cope people described feeling vulnerable, confused and tired, and in this context finding appropriate support or information could be extremely difficult, and subtle feelings of not belonging or being belittled in online discussions could be very upsetting. A lack of responses from others online could exacerbate feelings of isolation. And the sheer scale of content available could be bewildering.

c) The challenge of optimisation

People who took part in the research recognise the challenge of optimising the online environment for emotional support – what is

effective for one person may not be for another. They were also acutely aware that some of the issues explored by the research can be immensely complex: for example the tension between individuals’ right to express themselves and the responsibility of others to intervene if they are concerned about the content or nature of that expression. There are no simple answers.

However the research did identify gaps and recommendations regarding potential opportunities for Samaritans and focus on three specific areas of interest to Samaritans:

1. Providing support directly to people online (e.g. via instant chat)
2. How to effectively and appropriately reach out to people online who may benefit from this
3. Samaritans’ role in influencing or disrupting online content or narratives

The research explored and identified with end-users four key opportunity areas for Samaritans to optimise the online environment for people struggling to cope: **a live online chat service offering one-to-one support 24/7; a Samaritans app with a range of functions; curating and making accessible positive content online; and mobilising a network of supporters/ambassadors online so they are empowered to help others online and challenge unhelpful content.** This final point is perhaps uniquely suited to the online environment and the new ways of socially interacting across the online space it has introduced to everyday life.

Successful implementation of these opportunities will require **further development and user testing**, and must retain the core principles and values of **Samaritan’s DNA**, but they have been identified by end-users as **essential, priorities and ones that could effectively help those in similar situations in the future.**

What people told us through email, social media and our blogs

Through the questions, comments and discussions via social media and our blogs, a number of recurring themes emerged around what people want and don't want online:

a) More safe online spaces

"Knowing you will [be] listened to online is important. Having a safe place to talk with people you can trust helps"

People expressed a desire for trusted spaces online with effective moderation where they can feel safe and talk about how they feel. One commenter specified that a safe space online needs to accommodate both positive and negative emotions in order to be authentic places for people to be able to share. Being able to trust the organisation providing the space was raised as important for any online service and that trust could be gained by an organisation demonstrating they understand the internet and the needs of the people who use their services. Several people highlighted that a safe space online may involve new considerations to those of the offline environment, such as how to ensure anonymity in an online community.

b) Improving our services

During Digital Futures we were told that there were areas where we were already doing well online. For example, people like being able to contact Samaritans through the email service. However, the message was clear, there is room for improvement. People said they had to wait too long to hear back from a volunteer when using either email or the text service and wanted this to improve. Samaritans social media presence was considered to be effective, including using pictures to help show how difficult feelings can be a normal part of life.

However, several people said they wanted more engagement on social media and for there be an online space that was advertised as being monitored overnight.

c) Support from like-minded people

"Knowing someone had gone through the same made me more prepared to listen and believe them, even more than to my friends"

Peer support was mentioned as something that can be helpful when it is done well. Some people find places online where they can talk to someone else (who isn't a friend or family member) about how they are feeling really vulnerable. The ability of a peer support network to provide support seemed to hinge on whether people felt able to freely talk about their feelings, express themselves and feel comfortable bringing positive and negative emotions. This authenticity creates an environment that feels safe and accepting.

The internet seems to provide a unique setting for peer support and caters for people's needs in a different way than phone or face to face contact. People talked about how peer support online felt more discreet and had potential to give a greater degree of anonymity than phone or face to face support. It allowed them to access support easily at a time and place that suited them, and also meant that they could keep a record of their interactions, and return to them, if they wanted to re-read something. For some people the act of being able to come back to supportive conversations and messages was helpful and a way of prolonging the impact of the support.



d) A variety of options for support

“There needs to be a variety of support. Stuff to read or engage in. Engage 1:1 or group”

Multiple options and a range of places to turn to for support seemed to be important. People said their needs may differ depending on how they are feeling and one form of support does not necessarily fit all situations or people all of the time. Social media was given as an example of how people use different platforms depending on their mood and need. For example, some people liked using a combination of blogs and tweeting to meet their different needs for support.

e) Instant online chat support at any time

“Round the clock instant chat on the website would be pretty huge! (Both good and challenging!)”

Providing round the clock support is already a vital element of Samaritans services. People told us it is also crucial when providing support online. This seemed to apply to all potential services but discussion often focused on the benefits of a 24/7 instant chat service. Several people who emailed us talked about the benefits of being able to receive support through a written medium and the majority suggested that they would like to see Samaritans offering such a service.

A number of requirements were suggested for a chat service, including that it would need to be: fast, consistent, personalised and thoughtful. Some people mentioned a lack of support service online after office hours and felt that Samaritans should fill this gap.

There was recognition that instant chat could take a variety of forms and work across a number of different platforms.

The service would provide a welcome addition to the existing Samaritans service channels.

f) To be able to find good online support quickly and easily

“I never know where to go online”

Online support can be difficult to navigate. People told us they felt that searching for support and then knowing whether to trust websites and resources could be very challenging. Many want to see improved content on the Samaritans website and to be able to easily find information about issues and how to support themselves, and others, in addition to accessing online support services.

g) Using social media – public or private?

“Going on Twitter for distraction helps me manage my hypomania. Twitter is fast moving which is what I need”

People often said they used social media in lots of different ways when struggling to cope. Some found it a distraction from their problems, not necessarily using it to communicate about their issues directly, but as part of a form of escape, which in itself had been found to be helpful. Others talked about how openly expressing their feelings in a social media post can help them process feelings. Social media offers an opportunity for people to interact with others who have experienced similar issues and for some this is helpful, whereas others would prefer to be able to express their feelings without a corresponding interaction from anyone. Some find it difficult to trust others’ motives online and find the anonymity of using the internet something to be cautious of. However others find this helpful, allowing them to feel they can express themselves freely and connect with people.

h) Intervention and reaching out

In the online environment ‘reaching out’ means a variety of things. It could be sending a supportive private message to someone, or commenting on a Facebook post to let them know you are there, and have seen what they wrote or ‘liking/following’ a message or post. Who should reach out and if and when this should be a charity was a contentious issue. Opinion was divided over whether someone should reach out and intervene when they suspect someone is struggling online. Some people didn’t expect or want anyone to respond or intervene if they were struggling, however others hoped someone would reach out to help them. Some expressed that they wanted more guidance on how they could reach out to someone else and offer support.

Several people felt there was a difference between offline and online interventions and that because a charity reached out offline did not mean it should reach out online. However, some comments suggested that there would be value in trained site moderators/administrators stepping in where people have posted a comment that appears to express distress. They could potentially then send a message offering help which emphasises that the person can decide whether or not they want to accept it. Although value was recognised in this if an appropriate way was found, there was also the feeling that privacy considerations may mean it will never be appropriate.

i) Roles and responsibilities

We raised the debate of whose responsibility it is to offer support online. Whilst some thought it was very important that people shouldn’t be ignored when they post online others felt that people should be responsible for themselves and this shouldn’t fall to someone else.

Some participants believed that social media platforms have a responsibility to do more about harassment online and should look after the people who use their sites; others felt that platforms should not get involved.

There was some consensus that Samaritans has a responsibility to do more in the online environment, increasing our visibility and ensuring we can offer a reliable service, which is easy to find when a person is in distress. It was also suggested that we should be providing wider access to support through more online services.

j) Harmful online content

Harmful content was discussed as a challenge of the online environment and we received mixed views on the subject. There isn't one single definition of what harmful content is, however does seem to exist on a sliding scale and what is harmful is subjective depending on who it is seen by and when.

Participants gave a wide range of examples that could be harmful broadly including:

1. Trends that encourage harmful behaviour, for example via a twitter hashtag.
2. Triggering content – glamorising or sensationalising suicide, information and/or graphic content on self-harm and suicide methodology, especially on newspaper websites.
3. Individual responses or material designed to upset or damage another individual or group e.g. trolling, coercing, promoting, stigmatising, bullying (can also be triggering).

The majority of people felt that attempting to ban content would be ineffective, although some did express a desire for all harmful content to be removed or blocked from public view. It was felt that what is possible to do regarding this content depends on whether it comes from an individual or an organisation creating or distributing the content.

Some people felt that social media sites could better deal with trolling and bullying behaviours online. It was felt that some harmful content could be dealt with via a community response from within the online space it is being created in, such as a social media platform. One commenter felt they had previously been affected by 'unhelpful blogs' and would like to see this type of content prevented and support offered to those who made them and another wanted an age limit to be applied to certain types of websites that could be harmful.

Several people were supportive of working to educate internet users on why certain content is harmful and the impact it can have, and to encourage them to edit it or take it down. There was agreement that, although difficult, the laws covering harmful content need to be better enforced.



What people told us through our anonymous online survey

An online survey was available via Samaritans website and promoted via Samaritans social media channels and internal communications. The survey explored preferences and needs online and was open 27–26 July 2015, for anyone to complete who wanted to take part. A total of 657 people completed the survey resulting in the following findings:

a) Looking for support online

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



b) Support from like-minded people

- 68% of respondents to the question agreed that they want to be able to find and talk to people who have had similar experiences to them.
- 85% of respondents felt they'd like to be able to talk to people who are trained to support them.
- 82% of people said that trained moderators and clear guidelines/rules for posting are important in an online forum environment.

c) More safe spaces

85% of survey respondents said that when they were accessing support online, they want it to remain private/confidential. Almost 60% felt that anonymity was important.

d) To feel able to express themselves

Self-expression online without feeling the need to censor is really important, with 81% stating this.

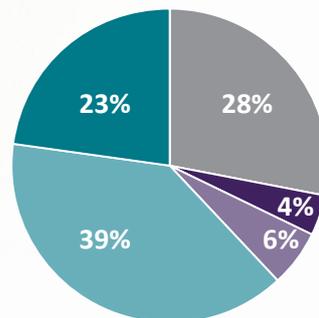
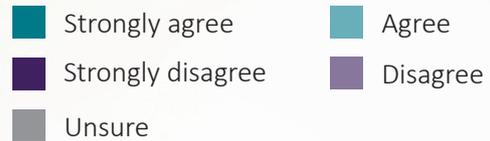
e) To intervene or not to intervene

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

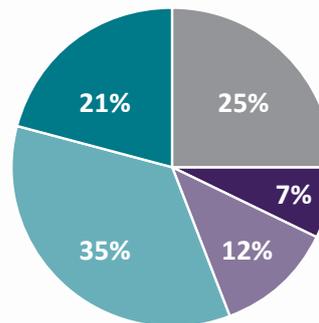
f) Instant and consistent support

87% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that being able to access a service 24 hours a day, every day was key.

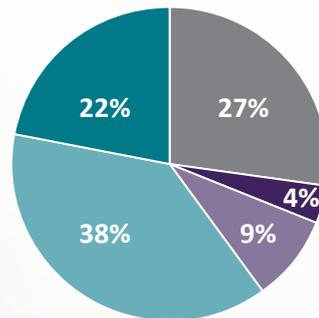
g) More findings



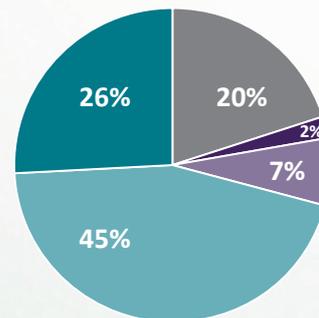
Charities like Samaritans have a responsibility to make sure there are support services online



If I am having a tough time I want a charity to reach out online and offer me support



I'd like to support others who I see struggling online but I'm not sure how



Sometimes people I don't know online can be a good support

Professional sector consultation stream

Discussion day

The discussion day consisted of a series of workshops and feedback sessions, which aimed to create debate and new ideas for the opportunities and challenges within the online environment. Broad concepts were posed to the group as a stimulus to frame a conversation. These concepts were based on a continuum between reactive and proactive activities that could be possible in the online environment.

They included:

Self-directed learning and self-monitoring

Tools and resources, based on theories such as mindfulness and CBT, which can be accessed at any time for learning and development with a focus on empowerment and self-support. For example, helping someone to have a better awareness of their feelings and emotions and supporting them to develop coping strategies/mechanisms.

Online community

Online forums/communities that could provide a safe moderated space for people to share experiences. Support could be offered through a centralised or dispersed forum.

Counter speech and outreach

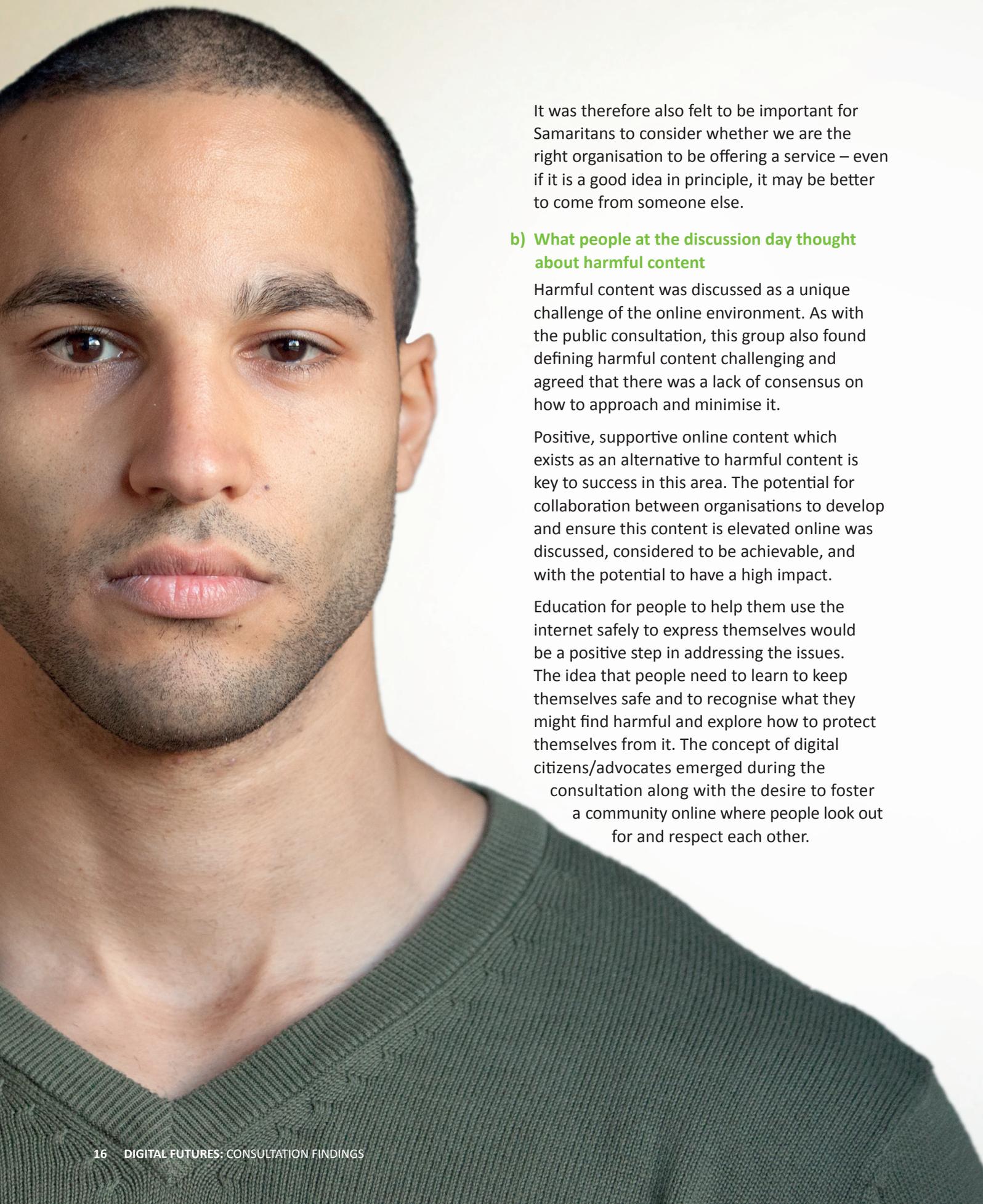
An alternative to censorship-counter speech would focus on adding supportive content to existing conversations that provide balance or alternative narratives.

a) Outcomes

Discussing these concepts resulted in a number of learning points for working in the online environment. Crucially, people in the group felt that any development work must be led by the needs of people who will use it, rather than

technological developments. They felt that just because something is possible, this doesn't mean it would be appropriate or should be done. The feedback also highlighted a need to continuously work to better understand online audiences; how they want to use services and what they need to feel supported online. Several people said that it is important not to make assumptions about online users, or be prescriptive in terms of the service that is offered. People felt that having a personalised service is important, so although a universal support service was deemed possible, this needs to adapt to the needs of each individual using it in order to be effective, in a similar way to the offline environment. Equally, any shared online support (such as a forum) would need effective moderation – the challenges of which were discussed at length – and this would also need constant quality control.

There are a number of risks to developing online services that were highlighted during the day. Privacy and authentication of anyone using a service needs to be considered. This means finding a way to keep the identity of people who want to use the service private from other users and anyone else online. Partnering with other organisations can be a very good way of creating more effective work, but this does also raise privacy issues that must be reviewed, and risks to be evaluated. Cyber-attack and hacking of any service is also something that was raised as something to be wary of and any service that is developed needs to be as secure as possible. Attendees felt that it was worth taking these risks to support people online, but that whatever is developed would not suit everyone.



It was therefore also felt to be important for Samaritans to consider whether we are the right organisation to be offering a service – even if it is a good idea in principle, it may be better to come from someone else.

b) What people at the discussion day thought about harmful content

Harmful content was discussed as a unique challenge of the online environment. As with the public consultation, this group also found defining harmful content challenging and agreed that there was a lack of consensus on how to approach and minimise it.

Positive, supportive online content which exists as an alternative to harmful content is key to success in this area. The potential for collaboration between organisations to develop and ensure this content is elevated online was discussed, considered to be achievable, and with the potential to have a high impact.

Education for people to help them use the internet safely to express themselves would be a positive step in addressing the issues. The idea that people need to learn to keep themselves safe and to recognise what they might find harmful and explore how to protect themselves from it. The concept of digital citizens/advocates emerged during the consultation along with the desire to foster a community online where people look out for and respect each other.

What other charities told us

We spoke to a range of charities, including mental health charities and those offering emotional support. Many of whom are already experienced in offering services in the online environment, or are working towards developing a variety of these types of services. They offered insights into the opportunities and challenges of working online and highlighted a number of issues to consider:

a) New challenges

The online environment presents unique challenges when developing support services. It is uncharted territory for many and can feel like a step into the unknown. There are issues that need to be considered for which precedents have not yet been set and prior experiences are limited or non-existent. One example of this is the challenge of geographical reach. It was suggested that Samaritans would need to think about how to geo-fence online products to restrict services and avoid the potential for an influx of global users which could create a higher level of demand than the charity can cope with. Another challenge is to understand how services differ online to offline with specific examples such as how long a conversation could be via Instant Messenger as opposed to over the phone and the implications this has for resourcing and adapting our service to work via a different channel.

b) Co-design

Co-design and user-involvement go hand in hand with technological development. Designing products with service users means bringing them into the process early on and engaging meaningfully. The feedback was that working in this way would ensure that services are fit for purpose, and avoid simply capitalising on the newest, most appealing technology or imposing 'solutions' and support services on people.

c) Barriers for charities in developing online services

The nature of charities means they are often not suited to the iterative and agile world of technology development. There are many charities that have achieved an effective online presence but it requires a commitment to exploring new ways of working and an investment in digital technologies in order to succeed. Another barrier to online service development was felt to be the tendency for charities to work in silos and the lack of cross sector and between sector partnership working. There was support for the way Samaritans is working, with our close relationships with social media platforms.

d) Barriers for users of an online service

Issues around the usability of online services when someone is having a very difficult time were raised several times. People need to have the emotional literacy and language to express themselves once they've found support, and doing this through the written word can be difficult when people are very distressed. There are pockets of tools and resources across the internet but finding these rely on someone knowing what to look for and where. If people don't have this existing knowledge or the language to help them find it, then it can be very difficult to know where to start and whether to trust what you do find. For many people, the stigma of looking for support is a hindrance to reaching out so making it easy and accessible is important.

Another problem expressed was the existence of a number of tools or services that aren't fit for purpose and which do not meet the needs of their users.

Being able to distinguish between what could be helpful and what could be harmful is difficult and without an accreditation or rating system, the user currently has to decide alone.

Digital exclusion can also be an issue. Interviewees raised issues about the practical barriers, which could prevent people from accessing online support. Some people are excluded through lack of access to technology to get online or not having the ability to access services 'on the go' via smart phones or tablets. 93% of UK adults have mobile phones, but only 66% use smartphones. Some online resources only work with certain technology (e.g. an app being available for apple products but not android) so even having access to technology doesn't guarantee access to all resources. Privacy when accessing support was also seen as important. For example, only having internet access in a public library, is unlikely to be sufficient-it is difficult to have a private conversation here. The costs associated with accessing some services can also prevent some people from being able to make use of them.

e) Technology and opportunities for support

Technology has the power to encourage people to reach out and seek help. For example, our mobile phones can feel like a natural extension of ourselves; always with us and integral to many of our day to day activities. This means that some people may feel more comfortable accessing support through a mobile phone because it feels safe and familiar. Therefore it was suggested that an emotional support app

positioned on the phone menu next to other apps related to daily life, such as for banking or road maps, could normalise the idea of seeking support, making it part of a daily routine and increasing access for people who might not usually think to do so.

Charities that currently provide an online forum or e-community felt they were effective in supporting users, but highlighted the large amount of time and resource required to ensure these online spaces strike the balance between being safe and allowing self-expression, interaction and engagement. They reported that users often talk about more difficult feelings when communicating through writing, such as in an online chat than through other channels of communication such as by phone. They felt this was especially true for feelings of suicide and self-harm.

User generated content was also thought to be really helpful. For example, blogs allow people to express their personal story and find others that have similar experiences, helping them to feel less alone. When a message comes from someone with personal experience this was deemed to be very powerful and supportive. However, there are challenges in sustaining a level of commitment and engagement from users.

For example, a blog requires regular content to receive followers and engagement and for some this isn't sustainable. It was clear that a lot can be learnt from current online support and there was a feeling among interviewees that Samaritans need to be clear about how and if they can contribute to this further.

Volunteer consultation stream

Volunteer reference group and Samaritans intranet forum participants

Volunteers are the life-blood of Samaritans. They are highly experienced in supporting callers in many different types of situations and are close to the issues that could arise in developing a new service. It was therefore vital that the Digital Futures project gathered the views of as many volunteers as possible. Also, with over 21,000 volunteers, that have different professional backgrounds across the UK and Republic of Ireland, we have access to a wealth of experience and expertise. This gave the opportunity to involve those who have worked in relevant sectors to also input their expertise.

A number of themes arose through the volunteer discussions:

a) The needs of our callers

The methods people use to communicate, seek and receive support are changing as are their preferences for technology. We need to respond to this in order to meet the needs of our callers and remain relevant. It was felt by some that we need to be thinking about how to deal with new issues arising through the internet, such as online bullying and harassment and whether we should be proactive in these areas, as well as how these issues may affect all callers, including those who make contact with us via the phone-line.

b) Resources

There were a number of practical considerations raised, which included resource implications for introducing new services and what this could mean for volunteers and their role. Digital services are likely to require new ways of delivery. Effective online support services could use volunteers to deliver them, but arguably this

could result in the need for more volunteers and training as well as the potential need for existing volunteers to commit more time to the charity.

Several volunteers felt that there could be an opportunity to recruit new or identify existing 'digital' volunteers with different duties to the current volunteering shift commitment and it was suggested that it may be more appealing to some people to volunteer with the skills required for online support rather than on the phone line. It was suggested that a volunteer would need to be dedicated to an online service during a shift in order to keep the service consistent and avoid it being interrupted with phone calls. Support requirements for volunteers online may differ and could benefit from an improved internal support system online to aid this side of the work. For example, an online space to share experiences, literature and best practice.

c) Improving our services

In addition to the feedback received by users in the public consultation, volunteers also recognised that we already do work online and that it is important that we ensure the services we already provide are as good as they can be and that we constantly work to improve them.

Several people felt that Samaritans need a more visible and accessible online presence. We already work with search engines to ensure our contact details appear when certain related search terms are used, but volunteers felt that we need to improve this work to ensure search terms are constantly updated and reflect the subtleties and changes in suicidal language.

Working with more search engines and sites where possible would also be beneficial as well as improving the natural search engine placement for Samaritans website.

d) Adaption or evolution

Volunteers discussed the fact that the online environment provides a number of potential opportunities for us to do things a little differently. We need to decide as a charity how much we want to deviate from the way we currently do things. Do we want to adapt our current services so that we can offer them online and use the internet to enhance our current services? Or do we want to explore entirely new ways to achieve our aim to reduce suicide and revisit the fundamental pillars of our service.

e) Change

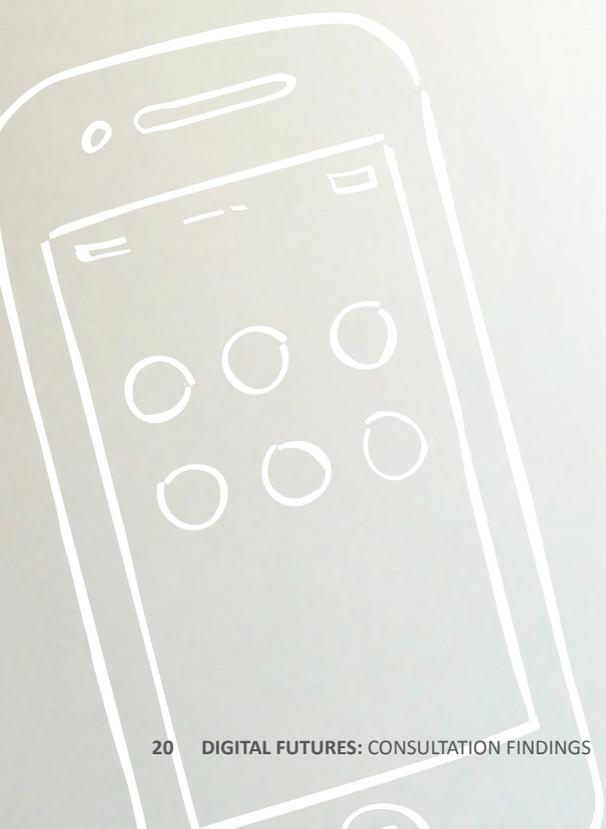
It was recognised that digital services will require cultural change. Whilst the online environment is very familiar to many, for others, providing online services may feel alien and uncomfortable, meaning they might find it harder or be less willing to engage.

f) Risks

Although there is enthusiasm amongst many volunteers for the opportunities the online environment offers, there is also some apprehension towards the potential risks. Some volunteers felt that with so many options available, there needs to be an element of caution not to take on too much too soon, affecting the quality of service and potentially Samaritans reputation. Some also felt there is a risk that we will not be able to keep up with the technological developments and maintenance required of any new service. Volunteer discussions acknowledged that there will be risks with any new online service development and that we need to think how to balance being cautious with being innovative and current.

g) Volunteer involvement in development

A very clear message was that volunteers need to be involved throughout all stages of development for any new digital services. The practicalities of how to do this are perhaps less clear. The volunteer reference group communicated via a private social media platform on Yammer, which aimed to give a cost-effective way for volunteers from all around the UK and the Republic of Ireland to input on the project. However, several issues were raised with this type of communication and some found it very difficult to use. With the need for volunteers to be involved being an important part of any development going forward, a way of sustaining involvement for volunteers needs further consideration. It is also important to have the role of the group and individual volunteers clearly outlined.



Digital Futures has allowed us to discuss and debate a number of key issues around emotional support and suicide reduction in the online environment. There are a lot of new learnings and ideas and the following begins to summarise these and where Samaritans are in terms of the work going forward.

Conclusions

Digital Futures Takeaways

There were a number of themes during the consultation that seemed to be consistent in terms of ways of working that will be useful in developing any new online service.

Keep up to date and evidenced

It is vital to constantly refine a product. If producing a new online service, we need to continue to update our understanding of the latest developments in areas such as technology, research and data protection as well as ensuring projects are evaluated.

Rigorous Testing

Rigorous and wide-reaching testing is critical for any online development project. We should consider best practice for beta-testing products as well as considering the impact of any developments on all people who it may affect, including those who may not want it.

Work in partnership

There is a wealth of expertise and knowledge across the charity sector and we need to avoid working in silos and instead work together to avoid duplication and capitalise on resources and knowledge. We also need to work with experts in other relevant fields.

Assess the risk

As a charity, doing things differently and innovating can be risky. There is the potential to get it wrong, to fail and to upset people. Volunteers have highlighted where they feel there could be risks as well as some desire to be cautious, but also motivation to find new ways to remain relevant and more widely accessible, reaching more people who need us. A full risk assessment is vital and development should not be rushed so that quality and safety is compromised.

However, there is potential to support more people through the online environment and make a real difference. The overwhelming message is that we will need to take some risks in order to do this.

Involve users

Co-design is fundamental to digital development. It is not possible to develop online services, tools and resources without working with those they are designed to help. When developing any new service, we need to gather the views of a wide range of audiences including current and potential users, volunteers, experts in relevant areas and anyone that may be affected by the development of that service.

Be present, visible and trusted

As a charity, it is vital that we have an online presence and provide services for people that are visible, easily accessed and developed and designed in a way that ensures Samaritans is viewed as a trustworthy organisation.

And Finally...

We know a lot more than we did at the start of Digital Futures. Not only have we learnt more about how people use the online environment and what people want from Samaritans, we have also learnt how better to work inclusively with others who are invested in our service; those who use our service or might do in the future, our fellow charities who are all grappling with the same issues

we are and the experts working in this area who can teach us so much about technology, privacy and the way our world is changing.

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

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

Thank you to everyone who has taken part in Digital Futures.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the consultation in all of the streams. Your input is invaluable in contributing to the Samaritans development work in the online environment.

Appendices

Appendix A

A summary of activities in the three streams of participants involved in the Digital Futures consultation.

Public consultation	Professional sector consultation	Volunteer consultation
Independent research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2 online forums 7 interviews 5 online focus groups 	Discussion day with experts on the online environment and digital influencers (25 attendees)	Volunteer reference group (25 volunteers)
Twitter chat x 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 147,323 impressions 447 engagements 	6 podcast interviews with experts	Dedicated pages and forum discussions on Samaritansnet (501 page views)
Online survey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 657 responses 	2 x blogs by digital influencers	
Blogs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4 blogs 1,239 page views 10 comments 35 private emails 	Active engagement of 7 digital influencers	
Samaritans website <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dedicated section on Samaritans website Dedicated Digital Futures email address established 	Charity interviews (including Mind, ChildLine, Mental Health Foundation, Bipolar UK and Rethink)	
Social media engagement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facebook posts: 65,685 impressions and 1,425 engagements Twitter posts: 201,224 impressions and 891 engagements 		

Appendix B

Twitter chats 1 and 2

You can read the twitter chats at the following links:

www.samaritans.org/digitalfutures/read-our-first-digitalfutures-tweetchat

www.storify.com/samaritans/digitalfutures-tweetchat-2-30-june

Appendix C

Digital Futures blogs

You can read the blogs along with the comments at the following link:

www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help-you/digital-futures/updates-digital-futures

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