

What needs to change to build a Fairer Scotland, learning from the response to the COVID pandemic?

Samaritans Scotland firstly wish to highlight some key concerns about socio-economic inequalities emerging from our Covid-19 research and evidence to be considered by the Social Renewal Advisory Board.

The mental health impact of Covid-19 is not being felt equally across the population and will likely exacerbate existing socio-economic inequalities. The impact could lead to worsening mental health outcomes for at-risk groups including those living in the poorest communities and on the lowest incomes. Our Covid-19 caller research was undertaken in response to concerns raised among our volunteers that the pandemic was causing similar worries among high-risk groups. Our research has shown –

- An increase in calls to our helpline from men discussing feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future. Job insecurity, fear of job loss and redundancy were all key concerns.
- Young people have experienced a much greater decline in their mental health than others. This was primarily a result of a loss of coping mechanisms, a lack of peer contact, and uncertainty about what the future holds in terms of education and employment.
- Lockdown has exacerbated existing mental health conditions, people were worried that their conditions would worsen as access to mental health services and community support was significantly limited.

Failing to address the mental health impact of Covid-19 could lead to worsening levels of mental health and illness among high-risk groups. In effect this could limit the ability of some groups to participate in the active labour market and hinder Scotland's economic recovery. Poor mental health is a significant barrier to secure employment and, conversely, insecure employment can lead to poor mental health.

We welcome the focus in the Mental Health Transition and Recovery Plan on tackling poverty and enhancing mental health support at the point of engagement with the benefits system. We encourage the Social Renewal Advisory Board to closely align with these commitments in its scrutiny of key policy issues. We believe that mental health and wellbeing must be an explicit policy priority of the Social Renewal Advisory Board if it is to stimulate a recovery from Covid-19 that reduces levels of poverty and builds a fairer Scotland.

We also wish to highlight the valuable role that the third sector and volunteering could play in Scotland's Covid-19 recovery and renewal, both at a community and national level.

Our volunteers are at the heart of what we do at Samaritans and we currently have nineteen branches and almost 1000 volunteers stretching from the Scottish Borders to the Shetland Islands. Despite suspending our face-to-face services to adhere to lockdown restrictions, our volunteers sustained our 24/7 free helpline service and provided emotional support over half a million times across the UK within the first three months of lockdown. More people sought support via our email service. Over the course of the pandemic we have moved swiftly to bring forward

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technology changes to support our lines and to move volunteer recruitment and training to virtual offers. Our volunteer branches have adapted successfully to meet the new demand.

At the beginning of the pandemic there was an admirable enthusiasm from the people of Scotland to support our frontline services in any way they could. The Social Renewal Advisory Board should consider ways in which it could build upon this enthusiasm and enhance Scots eagerness to support the wellbeing of their community as we move towards the Covid-19 recovery.

Tens of thousands of people in Scotland signed up to volunteer via Volunteer Scotland and the British Red Cross and many were not utilised in the immediate Covid-19 response. We would welcome consideration from the Social Renewal Advisory Board of how this enthusiasm – some of it clearly untapped – could be directed to support recovery and renewal

We believe that enhancing third sector volunteer opportunities for people in Scotland can provide benefits to both Scotland's Covid-19 recovery and the happiness and wellbeing of the individual –

- As we move towards economic decline and the likely pressure this will place on the labour market, volunteering could provide an opportunity to gain new and relevant skills. At Samaritans, our volunteers, for example, develop highly transferable skills in listening, communication, project delivery and leadership amongst others.
- Research undertaken by Volunteer Scotland has presented hard evidence for the positive impact of volunteering on health and wellbeing. Volunteering has the potential to overcome some of the major social challenges to improving health and wellbeing including social isolation, loneliness and poorly connected and engaged communities.
- Our recent report on less well-off middle-aged men showed that men who were struggling often desired a sense of purpose, a feeling of inclusivity, peer support and the opportunity to contribute. Volunteering can meet all these desires and provide much needed support to a third sector organisation.

The enthusiasm among the Scottish people to volunteer and support the Covid-19 response is an important lesson in the role that volunteering could play in bringing multiple benefits to a recovery and renewal that is rooted in local engagement and community redevelopment.