

Independent Review into Self-Inflicted Deaths in NOMS Custody of 18-24 year olds (Harris Review)

Call for Submissions: Samaritans' Response.

Samaritans is a charitable organisation that provides round the clock space to talk for anyone who is struggling to cope, is going through a tough time or feels that life is too much to bear. Samaritans volunteers help callers explore options and understand their feelings. People don't have to be suicidal to contact Samaritans. Everything that callers share with Samaritans remains confidential within Samaritans.

Listeners are prisoners who are selected, trained and supported by Samaritans to offer the same confidential emotional support to their fellow prisoners as is provided by the Samaritans service on the outside. This form of peer support is called the Listener scheme; almost every prison in England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland has a Listener scheme.

Samaritans believes that an effective Listener scheme can make a powerful contribution to an establishment's Safer Custody strategy. Operating a Listener scheme requires a strong tripartite relationship between Samaritans, Listeners and prison staff.

Prison staff help to identify prisoners who would make good Listeners; they make sure Listeners attend all training and support meetings and have the flexibility and accessibility they need to visit prisoners in their cells, round the clock, to offer support. They also arrange for Listeners to be available in Reception and First Night Centres and during Induction. They publicise and positively promote the scheme throughout the establishment, helping to develop a culture where it is ok to ask for support.

Samaritans volunteers run Selection events, Listener training courses (8 sessions over a 3-6 week period) and visit the prison usually every week or fortnight to give the Listeners an opportunity to offload, to share any concerns about the prisoners they have supported and to receive additional training in skills development. Volunteers also attend and contribute to Safer Custody meetings, offering valuable insight and perspective on suicide prevention.

Listeners deliver the service; they respond to prisoners' requests for someone to talk to when they are struggling to cope and then spend time with those prisoners, helping them to talk about how they are feeling and try to find a positive way forward.

The scheme cannot operate without the commitment and cooperation, in equal measure, of all three parties.

Prisoners can also contact Samaritans by phone or by letter; telephone calls to Samaritans are free for prisoners and there is a Freepost envelope service.

Samaritans is pleased to have the opportunity to respond to this review. However, we are not professionals or clinicians and are not in the practice of trying to identify vulnerability so that action can be taken with an individual. We don't offer advice or provide counselling and our service is available for anyone who needs it. We have a vision of a society, including those held in custody, where fewer people die by suicide. Our service is complimentary to, and an integral part of, NOMS Safer Custody agenda, but we are not part of the establishment.

For these reasons, it is not appropriate for us to answer all questions in the review. Where we have provided answers, these are based on our experience of delivering the Listener scheme across both the young offenders and adult estate as we don't differentiate between the two.

Identification of vulnerability

1. (a) How would you define 'vulnerability' in terms of a young person (under 24 years) who is in NOMS custody?

To Samaritans, 'vulnerability' (to suicide and self-harm) can involve a person (of any age, including young people aged 18-24 years) experiencing the following:

- A sense of loneliness and isolation; having no one to talk to.
- A reduced ability to cope; a lack of emotional resilience.
- A sense of hopelessness, defeat or a lack of self-worth.
- A sense of emotional/internal entrapment and a lack of control.

(b) What factors in their previous experiences are most likely to increase their vulnerability?

There are numerous, complex, and often interrelated, factors in an individual's previous experience, that may increase vulnerability to suicide and self-harm. These include:

- Current or previous mental or physical health issues.
- A history of drug and/ or alcohol abuse.
- Experience of abuse or bullying (including emotional, physical or sexual abuse and domestic violence).
- Other traumatic life events in childhood/early adulthood.
- Socio-economic background; individuals (especially men) from socioeconomically deprived backgrounds are at increased risk of suicide.
- Educational background and learning difficulties.
- Lack of support from family, friends and/or the local community.
- A sense of letting family and/or friends down.
- Bad debt and financial issues.

Samaritans believes that listening to people's problems and experiences, and giving people the chance to talk, and explore their feelings, can help reduce their vulnerability to suicide and self-harm.

2. Are there other things that should have been done to divert vulnerable young people from the criminal justice system?

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question.

3. At what point in their journey through custody are young people most vulnerable?

Samaritans believes that young people, similarly to adults, are most vulnerable in custody at the following times:

- The first 48 hours of custody; this is well known as being a time of high risk for suicide. Their vulnerability is very apparent to Listeners who have reported seeing the shock on the faces of new prisoners when they first arrive in custody.
- The first two months in custody; when young people are accepting their circumstances and offences, and still adjusting to their life in custody.
- The time leading up to a trial (for those on remand), sentencing (for those already convicted) and parole hearings can be highly anxious, and even more so after these events if they have a negative or worse than expected outcome.
- Transfers from Young Offender Institutes to adult establishments; uncertainty/anxiety around transfers and the shock of a new regime and environment.
- Transfers generally from one establishment to another or between categories; the uncertainty surrounding the transfer, the short notice which is given, adapting to a new environment, and concerns about distance from family and friends.
- Preparing for release; the anxiety of release and the fear of what will happen next.
- External environment circumstances; when distressing events happen outside of prison e.g. bereavement or illness of family/friends, the breakdown of relationships, or having children taken into care.

It is vital that Listeners are present in Reception when new arrivals are being processed so that, even if they are not ready, or don't want to talk at that time, they know who to ask for should they need support later. Listeners should also be available on First Night Centres and during the Induction process.

It is also important that new arrivals are given basic literature about the Listeners (bookmarks, pocket cards, etc.) and that the scheme is publicised throughout the establishment so that prisoners are reminded about the service at other potentially difficult times in their offender journey.

4. How can systems and processes be improved in terms of identifying which young people in custody are most vulnerable and at risk of self-inflicted death?

Samaritans is not directly involved in the prisons' systems and processes of identifying vulnerable young people in custody. Samaritans' Listener scheme can, however, be used in addition to the prisons' processes to reduce the risk of self-inflicted death. Staff awareness, understanding and support for the Listener scheme is a major factor in its effectiveness; the more that staff understand about the vital role that Listeners play, the more they will appreciate that time invested in supporting the scheme will pay dividends.

Systems and processes can only be effective if staff recognise that listening to prisoners, and finding time to get to know them better, is a critical element of identifying who is vulnerable. The importance of taking time to 'care' and making time to fully support the Listener scheme cannot be overestimated.

Staff training appears to focus more on systems and processes than it does on the human contact element of the role; training should cover not only the Listener scheme and how it can help staff to support vulnerable prisoners, but on the softer skills of listening, showing empathy and engaging with people who are struggling.

5. How can vulnerability be better identified in custody in terms of:

- i. Age
- ii. Gender
- iii. Ethnicity
- iv. Psychosocial maturity
- v. Drug use
- vi. Alcohol use
- vii. Location / distance from home
- viii. Bereavement
- ix. Mental health needs
- x. Learning difficulties
- xi. Communication issues
- xii. Educational needs
- xiii. Physical limitations
- xiv. Prior experiences of abuse and/or trauma
- xv. Other.

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question - All of the factors listed above may affect a young offender's ability to cope and thus affect their level of vulnerability. Samaritans does not have the expertise in each of these factors to offer guidance on how vulnerability could be better identified.

However, we cannot ignore that suicide is a gender and a social inequality. Research commissioned by Samaritans in 2011 ([Men, Suicide & Society](#)) reiterated that middle aged-men from lower socio-economic backgrounds are at increased risk of suicide; a demographic which make up a significant proportion of the prison population (while we realise this review is focused on a lower age group, the factors relating to socio-economic status and gender remain particularly important). We should therefore be mindful that this imported-risk from the general population to prison environment already makes the population a vulnerable one and that all other vulnerabilities might be exacerbated also.

6. Are there any bespoke tools that would assist in identifying particular types of vulnerability?

Staff could receive training to help them better understand suicide risk factors generally and how to engage with prisoners, whatever the underlying reason for their vulnerability.

7. Do attitudes and behaviour contribute to vulnerability; staff/staff, staff/prisoner and prisoner/prisoner?

Research has shown that staff attitudes towards Listeners and the Listener scheme can affect the operational success and running of the scheme (Foster & Magee, 2011; Jaffe, 2012). Where the scheme is well supported, and Listeners are appreciated, valued and respected, levels of vulnerability may be reduced. For example, a Samaritans Branch Prison Support Officer (BPSO, a volunteer role) recently expressed that the effective running of the Listener scheme is due to the support from the Governor and Senior Management:

“[They] have always been supportive of the Listener scheme. Facilities for training and supporting Listeners are good as is BPSO access to Safer Custody staff and Listeners. There is a caring environment in the prison and Listeners' work is valued as are other initiatives to support prisoners, e.g. LGBT day, anti-bullying and Well-being days etc.”

Resource cuts over the past year, in particular the apparent dilution of dedicated Safer Custody roles, have impacted the amount of time that staff have available to support the Listener scheme and this, in turn, seems to have detrimentally impacted staff attitude toward the scheme. Safer Custody, as an area of responsibility, is considered to be “flexible”, meaning that other responsibilities will take precedence when there are competing priorities. There appear to be fewer “champions” and “advocates” for the Listener scheme. However, these challenges are successfully overcome in establishments where there is senior management buy-in to the Listener scheme; support from the No.1 Governor is critical as this permeates throughout the establishment.

Listeners provide anecdotal accounts of prisoners having the perception that staff will think they are unable to cope if they ask to see a Listener. If staff single out an individual as vulnerable, an offender may be put off asking for help and may become more vulnerable. A

well-embedded and positively publicised Listener scheme can help change attitudes towards help-seeking.

The prisoner/prisoner relationship between a prisoner and a Listener is unique in that Listeners are not advice or information-giving, but they are confidential and non-judgemental. As peers, Listeners are better able to relate to the prisoners, and vice versa. We believe these factors are positive contributors to reducing vulnerability.

Information Sharing and Effective Communication

8. (a) What are the biggest barriers to effective information sharing and communication about potential vulnerabilities both within the criminal justice system and coming from external agencies?

Barriers might include:

- Staff indifference to, or perhaps lack of recognition of (both possibly due to insufficient dedicated training) whether someone is vulnerable; which may manifest as a lack of empathy and understanding of vulnerability.
- Staff attitude to punishment and rehabilitation.
- Awareness and understanding of the Listener scheme and the Listener role; Listeners have anecdotally described that where there is lack of understanding about the scheme among staff, prisoners are more vulnerable because staff don't think about referring prisoners to a Listener.
- Availability of staff; time for staff to have conversations with offenders, become aware of vulnerability, and pass on information at shift handover is important.

As an external agency, Samaritans' ability to communicate effectively with staff is impacted by operational challenges such as meetings being cancelled or postponed by the prison without notice, and staff re-structures which have resulted in what volunteers perceive to be a dilution of Safer Custody responsibilities (see response to Q. 7).

(b) How might these be overcome, particularly in the context of existing resource constraints?

Staff training and awareness of vulnerability, as well as better understanding and support of the Listener scheme, could help overcome these barriers. Samaritans could help improve staff understanding by getting involved in their induction training and/or their on-going training. Please also see the answer to question 9, below.

9. How can information sharing and communication be improved and better utilised to identify vulnerable young people and what information should be provided from (iii) external agencies?

As an organisation, Samaritans reduces vulnerability through providing confidential emotional support. We can share and communicate what we know about emotional support generally to help prison staff better identify and support vulnerable young offenders and to help them understand the importance of providing access to this form of support, alongside any other interventions. Samaritans can provide awareness sessions to prison staff, contribute to staff inductions, initial training and on-going training.

Samaritans and Listeners are not able to share information about individual prisoners they have supported. Confidentiality is at the heart of our service. This can be difficult for some prison staff to accept; we understand their concerns but it is critical that we hold on to this value because we know people need to feel safe so they can be open about their feelings. Without the absolute reassurance of confidentiality, there is a strong chance that they would not be honest about how they are feeling.

It is the act of speaking the seemingly unspeakable, and being accepted without judgment, that can offer huge emotional release, reduce distress and help people to think through their options and see another way forward.

By taking away confidentiality, we risk someone not talking at all. By taking away the opportunity to talk, emotions can spiral out of control and there is a danger of closing the gap between thought and action, between suicidal feelings and the possibility of a suicide attempt.

Prison staff will usually know when a prisoner has asked to see a Listener; that in itself should alert staff to the fact that somebody may be vulnerable but it is important they are able to respond to these observations in a sensitive way, without singling out prisoners and perhaps putting them off asking for Listener support again.

Awareness of the Listener scheme, through improved publicity and availability of promotional materials, can also help to encourage vulnerable prisoners to ask for support.

Although Samaritans is unable to share information about individuals, we can make a valuable contribution to general discussions about suicide risk and prevention. Invitation to attend the prison's monthly Safer Custody meetings is an important aspect of making sure this input can be given.

10. How can mental healthcare provision be improved to meet the needs of young people more effectively, in terms of:

- i. Information sharing pre-custody
- ii. Information sharing in custody
- iii. Information sharing post-custody

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question.

11. In the context of self-inflicted deaths in custody, how can any learning and best practice from the youth secure estate be best applied to the adult secure estate?

Samaritans hopes that all learning and best practices from the youth secure estate is shared and applied to the adult secure estate. Lessons learned, both the good and bad, should be considered and applied to mitigate future self-inflicted deaths in custody. Regular regional Safer Custody meetings are an ideal forum for this learning to be shared; Samaritans Regional Prison Support Officers (senior volunteer roles) are always pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to these meetings but they are not mandatory and seem to happen less frequently than they did a few years ago.

12. Are there effective mechanisms for responding to information received relating to vulnerability?

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question.

Management of ACCT

Samaritans is not involved in the management of ACCT so we are not in a position to comment on questions 13-18.

Management of Vulnerability in Custody

19. How might we most effectively take into account the needs and particular vulnerabilities of specific groups, including for example Black, Asian and ethnic minorities and young women?

Access to support should not be affected or influenced by ethnicity, gender or age. In particular, language should not be a barrier to accessing support; where possible, the relevant support should be made available in languages other than English, or people should be given help so they can access support in English.

Promotion of any support services should take into account the diversity of the prison population. As far as possible, Listener teams should reflect the diversity of the population so that prisoners feel the service is for everyone. Samaritans' selection procedures are fully inclusive and the opportunity to apply to become a Listener should be open to the entire population; prison staff play an important role in encouraging applications from all prisoners.

20. When a young person is remanded or sentenced to custody what issues should be taken into account in terms of initial allocation into an institution, and any subsequent transfers to minimise risk of self-harm and self-inflicted death.

Samaritans would strongly advise that Listeners are available for all offenders when they first arrive in custody and when they are transferred. This should include being available at

Reception, on the First Night Centre and during Induction. This should happen whether it is the offender's first time in custody, or their first night in a different establishment.

Other factors that should be taken into consideration include:

- Location of the institution and distance from family and support networks.
- Access to family and support networks (visits and phone calls).
- Medical and educational facilities.
- Other facilities which are necessary to meet the offender's needs (e.g. mother and baby unit).

21. (a) Do you think the recent changes to the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, which means those sentenced to custody will have to work towards their on rehabilitation to earn privileges – they will not receive them through good behaviour alone – have an effect on vulnerable young people in custody?

It may be too early to judge whether the recent changes to the Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme have had an effect on vulnerable young people in custody. Anecdotally, it has been seen that the IEP scheme helps prisoners to accept their situation and work towards obtaining privileges. This attitude helps prepare prisoners for release and instils a better work ethic. The fact that there are prisoners at different levels of the scale in the same prison can encourage better behaviour so more privileges can be earned.

Other more vulnerable prisoners may not benefit from the IEP system. For example, someone who is vulnerable and lacking self-esteem may not apply, or feel able or equipped, to access opportunities which may earn them privileges. Similarly, someone with mental health problems or learning disabilities may not present as being able to accept their situation. They may be downgraded to basic privileges. In this case the IEP scheme might work as a punishment rather than an incentive for some vulnerable prisoners.

22. How do you think that processes to support young adults who are transferring from the youth estate to the adult estate can be improved to help mitigate risk of self-inflicted death?

Samaritans is not aware of all the processes that are already in place to support young adults transferring from the youth estate to the adult estate. However, we consider the following to be important factors:

- The amount of information young offenders receive in relation to the transfer.
- The amount of notice young offenders receive of a transfer and the amount of time they have to prepare for this move.
- Young offenders should be treated as if it's their first day in custody when they are transferred to an adult establishment.
- If offenders have support needs, access to support should be available in the new establishment; support should be transferable.

- Consideration of the wing where young offenders are placed. The transition from a young offender institution to an adult establishment is a huge adjustment and the difference between the two types of establishment needs to be acknowledged and the transferee prepared for the differences.

23. (a) Are ‘safer cells’ effective or not, and why?

Samaritans cannot comment on the use of safer cells in relation to the mitigation of suicide risk. However, we would advise that prisoners should have access to Listeners if they are moved to safer cells. Human contact and having someone available to talk to during this time is essential.

(b) Does more need to be done to reduce the number of ligature points in cells?

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question.

(c) What could be done further to improve the design of safer cells?

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question other than to advise that these cells should have easy, round the clock, access to Samaritans by telephone and prisoners held in these cells have access to Listeners. However, Listeners should not be used as “babysitters” or expected to sit with prisoners in these cells for extended periods of time.

24. In the context of self-inflicted deaths, how can safety, including violence reduction and bullying, be improved in custody?

This appears to be a question relating to prison management; however Samaritans would advise the following:

- Promotion of the Listener scheme. The confidentiality policy of the Listener scheme provides prisoners with the security to talk about violence and bullying in a safe space. Listeners will not report this to officers, but will discuss other options with the individual; for example, seeking help from other sources including bullying and violence reduction reps. Listeners will not walk away from a situation but will work with the caller to help them find a way through their problem. Listeners don’t report problems to prison staff but offer an alternative approach to mitigating risk of self-inflicted deaths.
- A well-embedded and respected Listener scheme can have a calming effect in a prison, thereby helping to reduce tensions that might otherwise erupt into more volatile scenarios.
- Improved availability and access to training and courses.
- The use of violence reduction and bullying representatives.
- The use of other prisoner peer representatives.

25. (a) Are emergency procedures sufficiently well-developed both within prisons but also in respect of other agencies to deal with self-inflicted injuries as swiftly and effectively as possible? (b) How could they be improved?

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on prisons' emergency procedures; we don't know what sort of emergency first aid training is provided through courses such as POELT.

Procedures following a self-inflicted death in custody

26. Are adequate processes in place following a self-inflicted death around notification and family liaison, and support?

Samaritans should be on the list of agencies to be notified when there is a self-inflicted death; it is a good idea to agree procedures locally that would make sure:

- the prison quickly notifies the local Samaritans branch of the incident.
- the Safer Custody team advise the Listeners and facilitate them being available to support prisoners. This is particularly important because we know that the risk of suicide increases in the aftermath of an incident.
- Samaritans volunteers arrange extra visits to the prison to support the Listeners and prison staff.
- the prison can refer the bereaved family to Samaritans for support.

27. How can investigations into self-inflicted deaths in custody be improved?

From our perspective, If a Listener is being interviewed as part of the Prison and Probation Ombudsman (PPO) investigation or an inquest procedure, they must be supported by a Samaritans volunteer. During the investigation we ask that Samaritans confidentiality policy is respected. This is vital to maintain the integrity and therefore the effectiveness of the scheme.

28. How might arrangements around Legal Aid better take into account the needs of bereaved families?

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question.

29. How might processes be improved immediately following a self-inflicted death so that valuable information at the scene of the incident is better preserved and recorded?

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question.

30. How might the learning from deaths be better disseminated?

All staff should be involved in the learning process. Reducing self-inflicted deaths involves all staff, not just staff with Safer Custody responsibilities. Learning should be shared across establishments; perhaps through the medium of regional Safer Custody meetings.

31. How are families kept informed following a self-inflicted death in relation to the inquest and coroner's report etc.?

Samaritans is not in a position to comment on this question.

Staff Training

32. Are staff (this includes all staff working with offenders within an establishment, whether NOMS staff or other agencies) trained and prepared effectively for working with vulnerable young people?

We are responding to this question from the perspective of Listeners who are not "staff" but who volunteer on behalf of Samaritans.

Samaritans has a robust selection process which identifies the applicants most suited to attend the Listener training course; the process examines a number of aspects including emotional maturity, motivation for the role, ability to not judge, etc. A full selection process should last one day and it is important that establishments allow sufficient time for Samaritans to do this.

Once selected by Samaritans, Listeners receive comprehensive training in emotional support. 'Skills practices' during training help Listeners to feel comfortable in approaching prisoners who they believe may need emotional support. Listeners can empathise with the needs of vulnerable young people and can therefore work effectively to support them.

It is useful for prisons to be aware of the general support that local Samaritans branches can provide. In some establishments Samaritans provide staff awareness sessions and contribute to ongoing staff training sessions. This helps staff to prioritise 'care' and 'emotional support'.

33. What specific skills do you think staff working with young people should be supported to develop so they can better identify and manage vulnerability?

Samaritans' emotional support focuses on listening and communication skills and the ability to empathise and 'care' without judging. These skills, as well as the ability to recognise behavioural signals of vulnerability, are essential for staff so they can better identify and manage vulnerability.

During a joint NOMS/Samaritans/Listeners conference in 2013, Samaritans delivered adapted versions of some of the Listener training modules on suicide and self-harm; these were really well received by prison staff who commented that this was exactly the sort of training they needed – but currently don't receive.

Samaritans is working with NOMS to identify ways of sharing our knowledge and expertise about emotional support and suicide prevention with prison staff. Ideally, an awareness session on the Listener scheme will be included in prison officers' initial training. We hope this will increase understanding and support for the scheme, which in turn will help to reduce the vulnerabilities of young offenders. In addition, we are keen to explore whether there is scope to develop a bespoke training programme – to supplement awareness sessions – to give staff the skills they need to be able to take a more proactive and supportive approach to vulnerable prisoners.

34. Should volunteers be used to identify and manage individuals at risk, and if so, how?

Listeners are trained to identify and support (rather than manage) individuals at risk. Volunteers are not professionals but have a unique role to play in reducing risk. As peer supporters, Listeners are well placed to identify and 'help' fellow offenders. There may be less stigma for prisoners to speak to their peers rather than to prison staff, although having spoken to a Listener, a prisoner may then feel more comfortable about speaking to a member of staff. Research has shown that having support from peers is valuable to prisoners, since they are able to fully understand problems that staff or other professionals may not (Jaffe, 2012).

35. Are 'Listeners' being used effectively?

We know there is inconsistency in the operation of the Listener scheme across the estate; our responses to some of the earlier questions highlight the importance both of senior management engagement with the scheme as well as a good level of staff understanding about the scheme – how it works and how it can help. Together, these elements support the development of a strong and mutually respectful Samaritans/prison relationship which in turn results in an effective Listener scheme. In a recent survey, Samaritans' volunteers highlighted the importance of this relationship in running an effective Listener scheme. This is demonstrated in the following quotes:

"Officers are very supportive of the Listener scheme, and always praise the Listeners at the Safer Custody Meetings. They say that the Listeners make their work easier."

"The scheme is running well and the new team of Listeners are working hard to increase awareness. Staff directly involved are very helpful and although new to their roles are keen to accept any changes which will benefit the scheme".

"A new No 1 Governor has been appointed and is supportive of the Listener Scheme. He has influenced staff to become more involved in the recruitment of Listeners and this has made a difference in the number of prisoners applying for Listening roles"

From Samaritans' perspective, Listeners are being used effectively, if:

- Prisoners in all parts of the prison have round the clock access to Listeners – in a recent survey, we asked Branch Prison Support Officers about prisoners' access to Listeners during four time periods: hours of unlock; daytime lock-up; night time lock-up; and weekend lock-up. Over the four periods, volunteers' responses (based on their perceptions and feedback from Listeners) showed that prisoners always have access to a Listener in only 25 of the 85 prisons represented in the survey.
- Listeners are available in Reception and First Night Centres and play an active role during prisoner Induction.
- Listeners are collected from prisoners' cells when the prisoner feels ready for the support session to end.
- Listeners are invited to contribute to the prison's Safer Custody meetings.
- Listeners – working in pairs - are able to provide overnight support, in a dedicated Listener Support Suite, for prisoners in crisis.

In establishments where there is little understanding and/or respect for the scheme, Listeners report feeling under-used; many of the above aspects of an effective scheme do not happen and there is a sense that rather than facilitate face to face Listener support, some prison staff will instead give prisoners the Samaritans phone. The quotes from Samaritans' volunteers below illustrate the impact of lack of staff support for the Listener scheme:

“Changes of staff have a significant effect on Listeners and often on pre-planned happenings. We have tried different ways of recording hours of listening and numbers of calls due to this task taking most of the depleted Listener support meeting time. Stopping wing walking and I.E.P's have created change for the Listeners' movements. There is a feeling that phones to contact Samaritans are often given to inmates who have asked for a Listener.”

“Overdependence on the availability of one Safer Custody Officer has meant recent cancellation of two Listener support meetings and one training session. The six month hold is not always happening, especially in the male prison.”

“Support is agreed verbally but does not happen. The Listeners do not feel valued any longer and there is virtually no liaison between the Listener team and the prison. Promises made are not kept. Recruitment [of Listeners] is a source of anxiety”

“The Listeners feel lack of respect for them, and the Listener scheme from some officers. This could be due to lack of knowledge of the scheme by these officers.”

36. How should staff be sufficiently trained so that vulnerability is effectively reported and acted upon?

Samaritans is keen to work with NOMS on a national level to include awareness of the Listener scheme in prison officers' initial training. Samaritans volunteers, on a local level, also provide awareness sessions and contribute to on-going training for prison officers.

It would be useful if emotional support topics were included in regular on-going training sessions. This would encourage staff to give more priority to this aspect of their role; i.e. take time to identify vulnerable prisoners, make time to "care" for them and make sure they have access to emotional support.

We don't know the structure of prison officers' personal development and ongoing training assessments, but we believe that any performance review process should include the officer's ability to identify and respond appropriately to vulnerable prisoners.

37. How can procurement processes ensure that staff are trained and prepared for working with vulnerable young people?

The procurement process for staff training should include sessions on vulnerabilities and the positive impact that emotional support can have.

Family, support network

38. Should arrangements around family and support network contact be improved to i) support vulnerable young people and ii) better ensure families and friends can alert establishments to concerns?

Some Samaritans branches attend visitor waiting rooms in prisons to provide emotional support and raise awareness of our service. If a family member is concerned about an offender, they can request that a Listener is made available to speak to them. This is known within Samaritans as a third party referral. The availability to make third party referrals could be more widely promoted to family and friends.

References

Foster, J., & Magee, H. (2011). *Peer support in prison health care: An investigation into the listening scheme in one adult male prison*. University of Greenwich, School of Health & Social Care.

Jaffe, M. (2012). *Peer support and seeking help in prison: a study of the listener scheme in four prisons in England*. (Unpublished PhD). Keele University, Keele, United Kingdom.¹

¹ Copies of research are available on request.