

In their words

Understanding our callers

Experiences of
Samaritans' callers
in Ireland



The contents of this report may be distressing or triggering for some readers.

Should you be impacted by anything you read, **Samaritans is available 24/7** on **freephone 116 123** or by email **jo@samaritans.ie (Irl)** and **jo@samaritans.org (NI)**

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to the research team at University College Cork (UCC) for their tireless work, dedication, and compassion throughout the entire project.

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To all the research participants across our island of Ireland, thank you for giving your time and sharing your voice, your views and your story.

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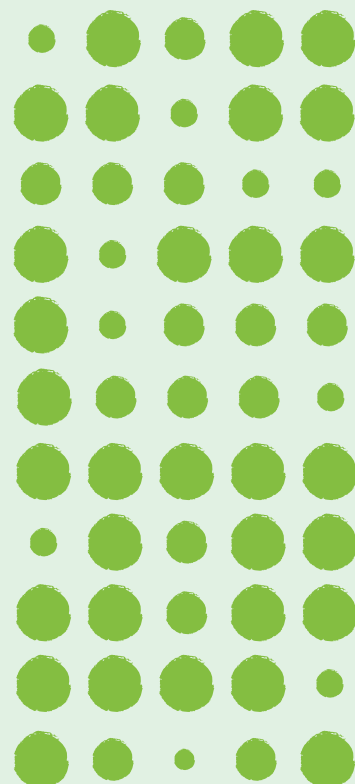
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Foreword

In the quiet moments of human struggle, a listening ear can be the difference between despair and hope. For more than 60 years, Samaritans has provided that vital connection, answering a call for help every minute of every day across Ireland.

This landmark research, ***Understanding Our Callers***, represents the first comprehensive examination of Samaritans' services in Ireland from multiple perspectives. It captures the voices of those who have reached out in their darkest hours, those who have directed others to our service, and those who have witnessed the impact of that support on someone they care about.

The findings are both insightful and informative. Nearly 80% of callers felt genuinely listened to during their interactions, and almost three-quarters reported receiving meaningful support. Perhaps, most powerfully, 84% identified Samaritans as providing a safe space for disclosure - a sanctuary where they could speak freely without fear of judgment.

Behind these statistics are profound human stories.

"I wouldn't be standing here today only for them" one participant shared.

Another described their experience as ***"literally like a hand came out and dragged me back."***

These testimonials highlight the life-saving power of compassionate listening, which forms the core of our service.

The insights gathered provide us with a robust evidence base for service improvements while confirming Samaritans' essential role in Ireland's mental health support landscape.

The 24/7 availability of Samaritans is often cited as a key distinguishing factor that sets it apart from other services.

As one participant noted, there was ***"a human to talk to at 4am when a family member was mute and suicidal"***.

In a fragmented healthcare system with increasing wait times and limited access, Samaritans remains a constant presence, which one participant beautifully described as an ***"emotional ambulance"***.

We extend our deepest gratitude to our callers and former callers for sharing their experiences and taking the time to participate in this study. Your courage in speaking about difficult moments helps us better understand how to support others facing similar challenges.

We also thank our volunteers, whose dedication makes this vital service possible.

As we look to the future, we remain committed to our vision that fewer people die by suicide.

This research strengthens our resolve and informs our path forward. It will help us reach more people, listen more effectively, and continue providing that crucial human connection, one conversation at a time.

Sarah O'Toole
Executive Director
Samaritans Ireland

Executive summary

Samaritans is a leading suicide prevention charity providing compassionate, 24/7 emotional support through a network of 16 locations across Ireland. Our trained volunteers dedicate thousands of hours to supporting those in need, answering around 470,000 calls and emails annually.

Overview

For decades, Samaritans has provided emotional support to callers; however, limited research exists examining users' experiences with these services. This mixed-method study presents the first comprehensive examination of Samaritans' services in Ireland from multiple perspectives, including personal accounts of callers' experiences, those who direct others to our service, and individuals who know someone who has used the service.

This research gathered insights from almost 600 people across Ireland through surveys and in-depth qualitative interviews - providing a 360-degree view of Samaritans' role in Ireland's mental health landscape.

Analysis revealed that satisfaction levels were highest amongst those seeking emotional support and mental health crisis intervention, which aligns with Samaritans' core service mission. Less positive experiences were reported by callers seeking advice for specific issues, such as financial difficulties or bullying and harassment, which fall outside Samaritans' remit for emotional support.

Key recommendations focus on enhancing the first-time caller experience, supporting specific caller groups, and improving awareness of current services.


These insights provide a robust evidence base for service improvements while confirming Samaritans' essential role in Ireland's mental health support landscape.

Why this research matters

This study provides a crucial evidence base that directly supports Samaritans Ireland's strategic priorities and strengthens our contribution to national suicide prevention efforts. By gathering insights from callers across Ireland, we can now make informed decisions to enhance access to our services, particularly for under-served populations and first-time callers.

The findings reveal opportunities to extend our reach, ensuring our services connects with those most vulnerable to suicidal ideation. The powerful testimonials and high satisfaction rates demonstrate our impact on callers during critical moments of distress. These insights allow us to build capacity strategically, focusing resources on caller needs identified through this research.

Most significantly, this research provides vital data to inform Ireland's next suicide prevention strategy.



The study included 586 people across three surveys, with additional in-depth interviews conducted with 12 individuals around their lived experience.

Highlights

The experience of callers using Samaritans

79% of callers **felt truly listened to**

84% found Samaritans provided a **safe space to speak freely**

73% felt supported

77%
of those who knew
someone who used
Samaritans' services
reported positive
outcomes

"That there was a
human to talk to at
4am when a family
member was mute
and suicidal."

The main professionals referring to Samaritans were

- ▶ Psychotherapists (12.5%)
- ▶ Mental health/psychiatric nurses (10.9%)
- ▶ NGO volunteers (10.9%)
- ▶ Counsellors (9.4%)

Mental health professionals placed high confidence in our service

- ▶ 7 in 10 professionals who received feedback reported **positive outcomes**

68%
of those who contacted
during a mental health
crisis reported
receiving support

What callers value most about Samaritans

Non-judgemental listening

Genuine
empathy

Time
and
space

24/7
availability

Anonymity

The impact of our service

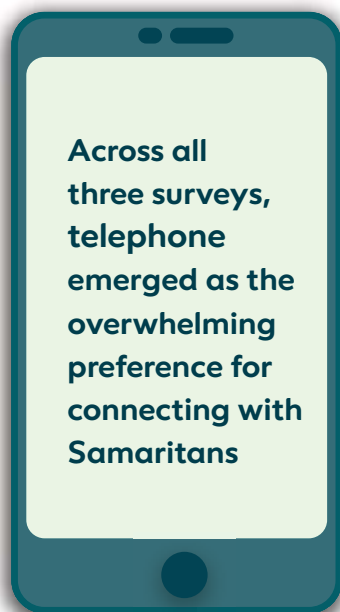
Making a difference where it matters

Samaritans' vision is that fewer people die by suicide. We are here every day and night of the year for anyone struggling to cope, to make sure people have somewhere to turn and support when they need it most. We also work with communities to let people know we're here for them and campaign to make suicide prevention a priority.

Despite Samaritans' 60-year history of providing emotional support in Ireland, we know surprisingly little about how callers experience our services.

Every minute, a Samaritans volunteer answers a call from people in distress, providing a crucial lifeline when it's needed most.

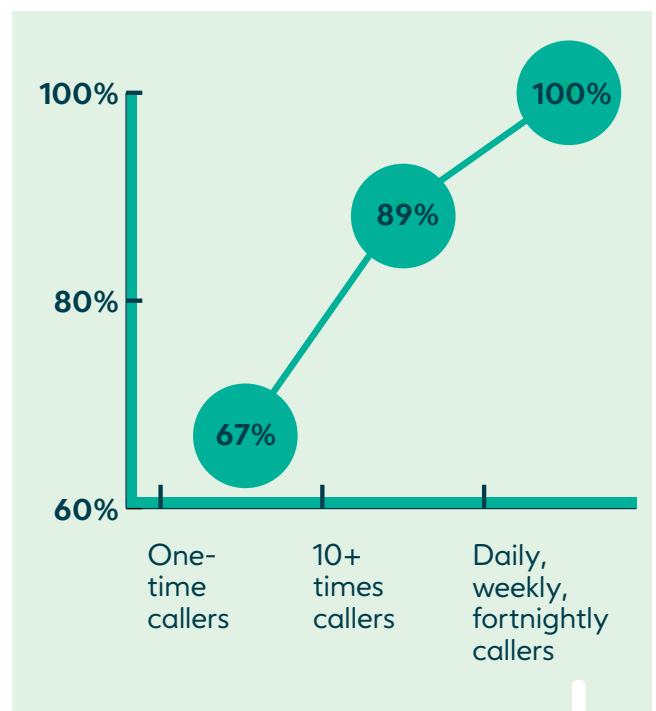
While the numbers tell a powerful story, the deeper patterns and context behind these statistics reveal the actual value of our service.



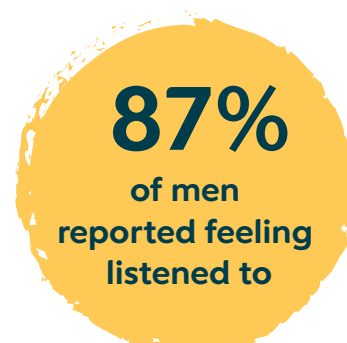
Beyond the numbers

The research found callers who were more familiar with the service had an improved experience. This shows the strength of our person-to-person approach.

While 67.5% of one-time callers felt listened to, a higher percentage (89%) of those who called ten or more times reported feeling listened to. **Remarkably, 100% of daily, weekly, and fortnightly reported feeling listened to.**



Gender differences in experiences also emerged. While fewer males completed the survey, a higher percentage reported positive interactions.



What professionals think

A trusted resource

Mental health experts across various disciplines also trust Samaritans as a valuable resource for their clients, with psychotherapists (12.5%) leading referrals, closely followed by mental health and psychiatric nurses (10.9%). This professional confidence is well placed, as over half (50.8%) of practitioners reported their referred clients received meaningful support from our service.



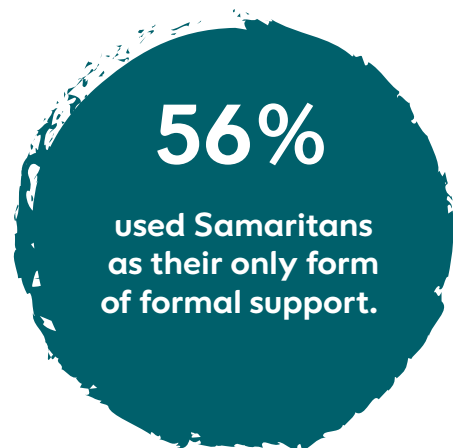
The strong endorsement from healthcare professionals highlights Samaritans' important complementary role within Ireland's broader mental health support ecosystem.



A safety net when others are closed

The research also highlighted how Samaritans fills gaps in the broader support ecosystem. For over half of our callers who use no other support, Samaritans is an important lifeline. For others, Samaritans offer different support from what they receive elsewhere.

Samaritans' focus on listening rather than directing allows callers to process their emotions and often find solutions by articulating their thoughts.

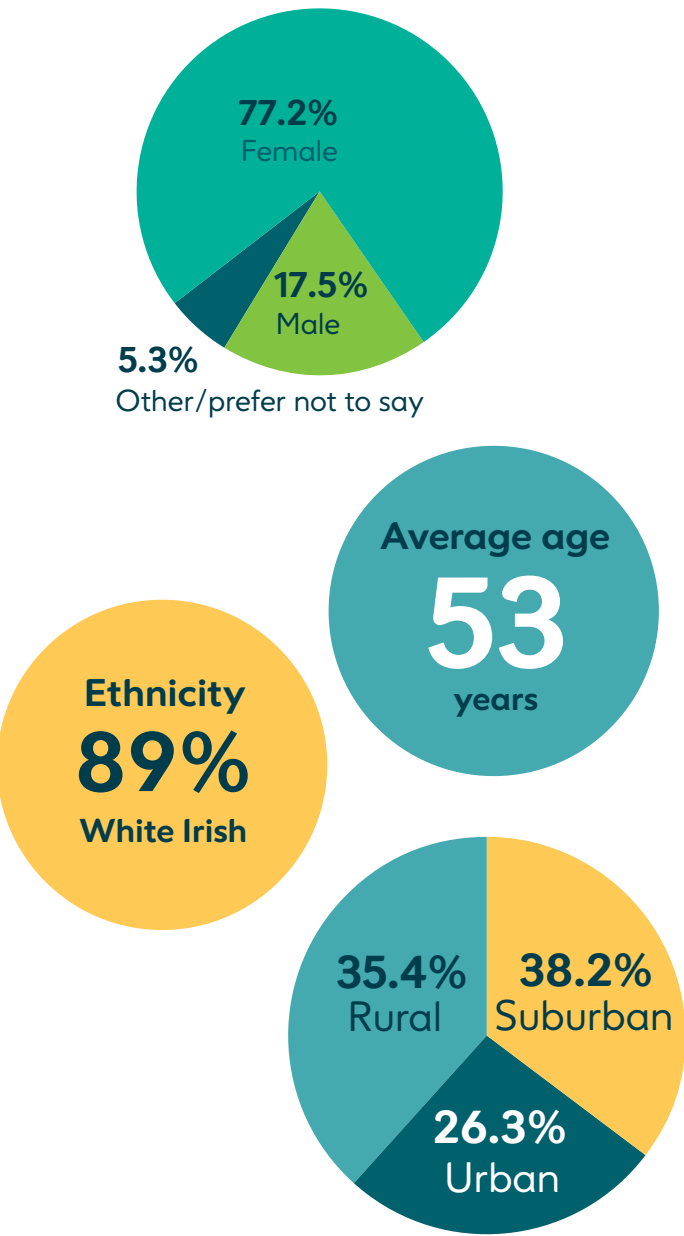


Samaritans also answers calls diverted from other organisations when their helplines were closed, these are often overnight when people are most in need.

The challenges facing our callers

A total of 395 respondents completed **Survey 1** (people who have used Samaritans' services in Ireland), giving us a unique insight into who calls us, why they call us and when they call us. We thank each of them for sharing their story.

Who took part?

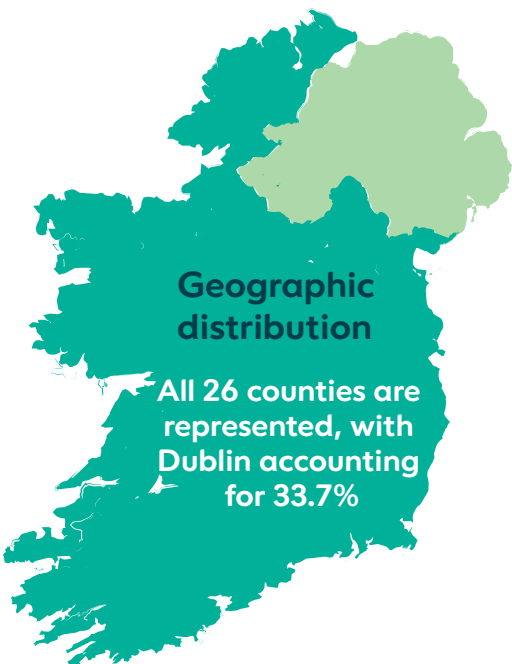


What challenges had callers identified with

- Nearly **9 in 10** experienced **mental health challenges**
- More than 1 in 3 experienced **some form of abuse**
- **A third** live with a **chronic physical condition**.

Those who called 10+ times (16% of callers)

- Higher rates among **26-35 year olds** (18%)
- More likely to be **separated** (24%) or **single** (24%)
- **Unemployment** significantly higher (27%)



Understanding the people we serve

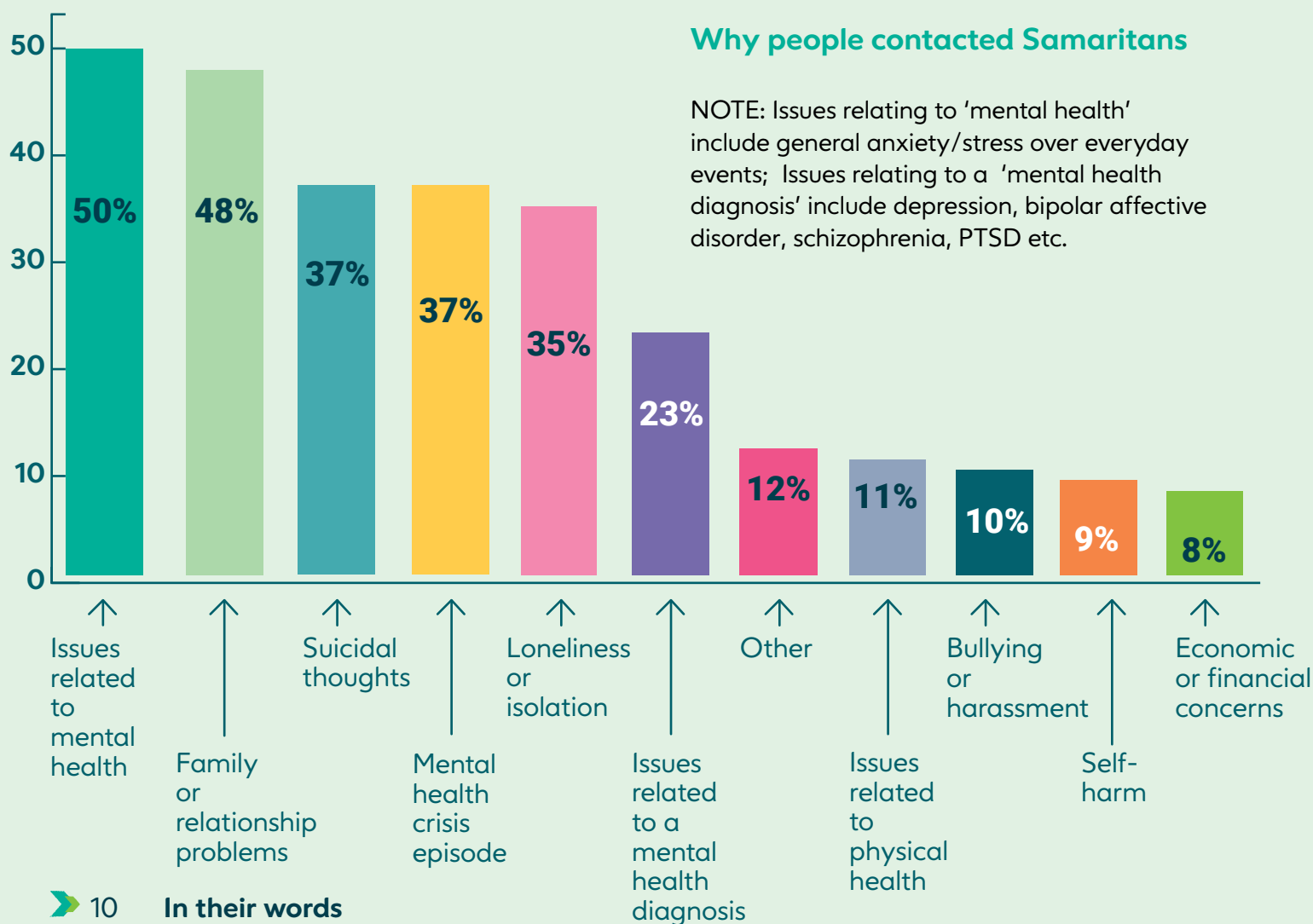
Behind every call to Samaritans is a unique individual facing personal challenges. Our research provides valuable insights into who these callers are and the complex circumstances that lead them to reach out for support.

The high proportion of callers with mental health challenges highlights the vital role Samaritans plays in that area. But importantly, we found these mental health challenges rarely exist in isolation – many callers face multiple vulnerabilities simultaneously.

Respondents selected which statements, if any, were true for them for contacting Samaritans. Several options related to mental health were provided, with family

or relationship problems, suicidal thoughts, and loneliness and isolation also ranking high. Samaritans is well placed to support people with a broad spectrum of needs as our volunteers offer a non-judgemental listening ear.

"You can just step in and get that support when you need it because as I say, I knew if I rang my husband or the children, they would all start fussing and worrying and ringing my sister-in-law."



Seeking support

Data revealed how people engaged with Samaritans, using us as a critical intervention point and helping to navigate difficulties.

Unlike physical healthcare, where ongoing treatment is the norm, many callers use Samaritans for specific moments of crisis or difficulty rather than continuous support.

Even a single supportive conversation can make a significant difference for these callers at a crucial moment.

We examined how people contacted us, how often they contacted us, and when they last needed support.

Respondents spoke about the reasons we were their preferred support



How people reached out	Number of times contacted Samaritans	Frequency of contact	Last contact with Samaritans
Telephone 88.6%	Once 31.9%	Daily 1.3%	In the last week 3.8%
Email 2.4%	2-4 times 38.5%	Weekly 2.8%	In the last month 5.6%
Fact to face 4.8%	5-9 times 13.9%	Fortnightly 1.5%	In the last 6 months 14.9%
Text 6.6%	10+ times 15.7%	Monthly 3.5%	In the last year 14.2%
		Yearly 8.6%	In the last 5 years 26.8%
		Less often 57.2%	More than 5 years ago 34.7%
		Other 25.1%	

In their words

The human stories behind the statistics

While statistics provide important insights, it's the personal narratives from our qualitative research that truly illuminate the lived experience of using Samaritans.

Through in-depth interviews with researchers, 12 participants shared their experiences, with four key themes emerging.

The value of being heard

1

"It was just pure unconditional listening. No... hearing: hearing."

"He was just listening, and it's like he gave me the permission to just say whatever I was thinking.... that it.... It didn't matter to him, you know?"

Accessibility & availability

2

"My idea of the Samaritans is that they are an emergency response unit, something like an emotional ambulance, if you like."

"Samaritans are the ones that I can have access to there and then, it's like it's kind of having a tool in your back pocket. If you've broken something, it's just there. And I know they're there and it's a real comfort for me."

The power of human connection

3

"I wouldn't probably be standing here today only for them."

"It was literally like a hand came out and dragged me back, you know, it was... It was phenomenal."

"You know, I'm talking to a Samaritan once. And she had me in stitches laughing. You know, just a character.... It was great. It was wonderful."

Feeling safe in an anonymous space

4

"I just sat on the stairs in my house and cried. And the guy just listened to me, you know? I just needed to get the grief out. [...] I knew he wasn't judging me. [...] as a result, I got the freedom to talk a lot more clearly."

"I liked the fact at the time that it wasn't face-to-face, or it wasn't a video call, that it was anonymous. [...] Just dial it, and then they say things like, you know, your number doesn't appear on a bill or things like that."

Those supporting our callers

Accounts from those who have signposted or referred others to Samaritans (**Survey 2 = 126**) and from those who know someone who has called Samaritans (**Survey 3 = 65**) also highlighted how valuable the Samaritans service is as part of a wider support network.

In Survey 2

People who signposted someone to Samaritans included

- **Professional service user from service you work in:** 65 (51.6%)
- **Friend:** 35 (27.8%)
- **Someone unknown to me in distress:** 26 (20.6%)
- **Other family member:** 16 (12.7%)
- **Work colleague:** 16 (12.7%)
- **Other:** 12 (9.5%)
- **Spouse/partner:** 5 (4%)
- **Parent guardian:** 4 (3.2%)
- **Sibling:** 8 (6.3%)
- **Housemate/roommate:** 3 (2.4%)

People signposted others to Samaritans for the following top three reasons:

- **Issues related to mental health** (60.3%)
- **Suicidal thoughts** (46%).
- **Loneliness or isolation** (41.3%).

While over a third did not have contact with the person again, **over half reported that the person they signposted to Samaritans were helped a lot or somewhat.**

This additional context provides deeper insight into the third-party perspective on Samaritans' services, particularly highlighting the high perceived value from those who witness the impact on someone they know.

In Survey 3

- While we had a smaller number of respondents, almost half (47.7%) of those were primarily a friend of the person who had sought support from Samaritans.
- Others were service providers (18.5%), family members (26.2%), or a bystander who encountered someone in distress (13.8%).
- The primary reasons for contact were mental health issues 56.9% and suicidal thoughts (44.6%). Overall, 76.9% of respondents indicated that the person they knew received meaningful support.


Looking forward

Key recommendations

An initial suite of recommendations was based on the qualitative and quantitative findings of this report and further developed by an expert panel of Samaritans volunteers and staff.

Rather than requiring a fundamental shift in approach, the recommendations focus on targeted enhancements that build on the solid foundation of what already works well.

We identified needing to improve the general knowledge about what Samaritans can do and offer, especially for those calling for the first time, and ensuring volunteers are equipped to take calls on a range of diverse issues.



"There is a hope and an expectation that we can fix it, and that's not necessarily what we're there for." Volunteer

"We are not there to provide help, just to listen, but that minimises what we do. While we do listen, we listen actively... I don't think we should undersell what we do by calling it 'just listening'." Volunteer

1 Better support for first-time callers

Set clear expectations

Create materials explaining **what Samaritans offer** - emotional support rather than direct advice.

Develop a simple "**What to expect when you call**" guide to share across platforms.

2 Enhanced support for specific caller groups

Specialist knowledge sharing

Organise volunteer-led information sessions on specialist topics such as bullying and ensure these are **adapted to a listening approach**.

Ensure all equality and diversity training provides insight into issues volunteers may not have personally experienced, such as **financial hardship**.

3 Raise awareness of our service

Guide for referrers

Create clear information for **professionals** who refer people to us, explaining exactly what we do and how to make appropriate referrals.

Highlight our true value

Launch a 'mythbusting' campaign that **accurately portrays what Samaritans does**, emphasising that "active listening" is a powerful skill, not "just listening."

Background and methodology

Despite Samaritans' 60-year history of providing emotional support in Ireland, we knew surprisingly little about how callers experience our services. Past research has primarily focused on call patterns and volunteer perspectives, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. While analysis of anonymous call data has revealed behavioural trends, this study represents the first comprehensive exploration of callers' direct experiences with Samaritans in Ireland.

Our approach

The purpose of this project was to understand how Samaritans make a difference in people's lives. **While volunteers answer hundreds of thousands of calls each year, we've never systematically asked callers about their experiences.**

How we gathered perspectives

A total of 586* adults aged from 18 - 85+ years took part in the surveys, which remained active from July to September 2024. Each survey was developed collaboratively by the research team (including team members with experience volunteering for Samaritans and those with lived experience of mental health challenges) and Samaritans Ireland.

Three separate surveys were developed for:



1

People who had used Samaritans' services in Ireland

2

People who had signposted others to Samaritans

3

People who knew others who had used Samaritans' services



In addition, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted with participants who opted to share their experiences in more detail. These interviews were facilitated by a registered mental health nurse and lasted between 12 and 60 minutes.

Limitations

This research captures the experiences of a self-selected group that responded to our social media survey rather than a random sample of all Samaritan callers. The sample differs somewhat from our contact systems data, with males underrepresented (17.5% of survey respondents versus 51% of actual callers).

Additionally, 34.7% of respondents last contacted Samaritans over five years ago, representing a substantial proportion of historical rather than current users.

Ethics

The Social Research Ethics Committee, University College Cork (UCC), granted ethical approval for the study. Throughout the study, the researchers adhered to core moral principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice. We emphasised participants' voluntary participation and provided them with contact details for support services.

*The people who answered this survey are a snapshot of Samaritans' callers and do not represent all our callers.

Conclusion

The vital connection

This study – **In their words:**

Understanding our callers in Ireland

- confirms what thousands of callers already know: **Samaritans stand as an irreplaceable pillar in Ireland's mental health landscape.**

Our volunteers – who are ordinary people doing extraordinary work - answer a call for help every minute of every day, creating moments of connection that callers describe as 'literally lifesaving.'

The powerful testimony captured in this research speaks to the unique position Samaritans occupy when other services are closed, accessible without appointment or referral, and offering the profound human connection that is increasingly rare in our digital age.

As one caller expressed, ***'It was literally like a hand came out and dragged me back.'***

Beyond individual impact, this research reveals Samaritans' critical role in Ireland's broader mental health ecosystem. Mental health professionals trust and rely on our service, knowing their clients will receive compassionate support during their most vulnerable moments.

This complementary relationship represents a cost-effective enhancement of statutory services, extending support beyond limited office hours and appointment slots.

The evidence is clear: Samaritans don't just save lives - we create a safety net that strengthens the entire mental health infrastructure.

With continued investment and strategic expansion of our service capacity and research capabilities, Samaritans is uniquely positioned to:

- Generate real-time insights into emerging mental health challenges facing Irish communities.
- Provide immediate support that prevents escalation to crisis levels.
- Identify systemic gaps where vulnerable individuals fall between services.
- Offer evidence-based policy recommendations on the prevention of suicide.

In a time of increasing mental health challenges, Samaritans remains a beacon of hope - one conversation, one connection at a time.

With the continued support of our funders and donors, we stand ready to answer every call, extending our vital work into new frontiers of service, research and advocacy.

We would like to thank our callers and former callers for sharing their experiences and taking the time to take part in this study, and our volunteers for sharing their insights.

If you've been affected by this report, call Samaritans on freephone **1116 123** or email **jo@samaritans.ie**

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