



Cross Party Group on Suicide Prevention - sponsored by Jayne Bryant MS
Wednesday 24th May 2023
Hybrid meeting

Attendees: Neil Ingham (Samaritans), Emma Gooding (Samaritans), Laura Frayne (Samaritans), Hannah Swirsky (Samaritans), Jayne Bryant MS (Senedd), Gemma Moeller (South Wales Police), Claire Cotter (NHS Wales Health Collaborative), Ceri Fowler (NHS Wales Health Collaborative), Olga Sullivan (Samaritans), Andrea Sullivan (Cardiff & Vale University Health Board), Claire Thomas (South Wales Police), Tara Robinson (Cardiff & Vale University Health Board), Bethan Hodges (Samaritans), Vicki Keegans (North Wales Police), Philippa Watkins (Welsh Parliament), Sian Bamford (Dyfed Powys Police), Ana Laing (Samaritans), Sarah Rushworth (SOBS), Rachael Robins (4 Mental Health), Gwenno Thomas (Ofcom Wales), Sonia Giga (Ofcom), Peter Allchurch (Diverse Cymru), Willow C Holloway (FTWW/Autistic UK), Steve Siddall (RNLI), Jemma Rees (NHS Wales Health Collaborative), Briony Hunt (Samaritans), Maggy Corkhill (Co-alc Alliance), Phil Sparrow (South Wales Police), Madelaine Phillips (NHS Confederation Wales), Professor Ann John (Swansea University)

Apologies: Chris Cousens (RNLI), Llyr Griffiths MS, Thomas Hollick (The Wallich).

1. Welcome and introductions

Jayne Bryant MS welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that some of what may be discussed at the meeting may be upsetting for some and advised attendees to step away and have a break from the meeting if needed and to reach out for support following the meeting if they need to.

2. Minutes from previous meeting and matters arising

There were no matters arising and the minutes were accepted.

3. Hannah Swirsky, Samaritans Public Affairs Manager – Online Safety Bill

Hannah gave a presentation to the group about Samaritans work on the Online Safety Bill. Hannah explained why online safety is important, how suicide is a complex issue but harmful online content can play a part.

Samaritans have recently done research in this area with Professor Ann John from Swansea University. The findings showed people were more likely to have self-harmed as a result of viewing harmful content online. 83% of people surveyed had found suicide and self-harm content without searching for it and 75% of people had seen this type of content before the age of 14.

Samaritans has an Online Excellence Programme which provides guidelines for the industry, runs an advisory service for social media platforms and has guidance to support practitioners. Samaritans recently ran a campaign to promote guidance on how to talk about suicide online, working with young people to raise awareness on Instagram.

Hannah explained that the UK government's online safety bill aims to make the UK the safest place in the world to go online through new rules for sites that post content from individual users, including social media but also other forums – and search engines. They will need to tackle priority illegal material for everyone and take steps to stop children seeing content that is damaging, but not illegal. The largest sites – like Facebook or Twitter – will also have to give adults tools to control the content that they see.

Samaritans policy recommendations are that;

- suicide and self-harm content should be a priority for action in legislative and regulatory efforts to reduce online harms
- all user-to-user online platforms, regardless of their reach, should be compelled to remove harmful user-generated content around suicide and self-harm
- Supporting the creation of a new offence of encouraging or assisting self-harm as recommended by the Law Commission of England and Wales. However, offences and enforcement activity should not be framed in a way that criminalises or stigmatises vulnerable people, or curtails the online peer support that people value.

Hannah explained while Samaritans agree children should have strong protections online, being an adult does not make someone immune from this damaging content. There are more rules for the largest platforms but this does not really reflect the way that we all use the internet – we will all likely see content on a range of forums. The new law risks making some parts of the internet safer than others.

In order to get to the changes needed, Samaritans have used a number of different tactics for example, publishing a policy report, making parliamentary submissions, talking to politicians ourselves, asking campaigners to talk to politicians about their experiences, using the media and social media to influence public opinion. Hannah explained two excellent wins Samaritans had recently on the things they are trying to change in the new law. Firstly, the UK government has written illegal suicide content into the new law as a priority – it being part of the wording in this way is incredibly powerful and will definitely drive restricting access to this harmful content.

The government has also now tabled an amendment to the Bill to create a new offence of encouraging or assisting self-harm, and that illegal self-harm content will also be a priority. This follows recommendations by the Law commission in 2020. This means that tackling illegal suicide and illegal self-harm content, will both be in the wording of the new law. Samaritans are working with the government to ensure it focuses on malicious content and does not affect support available for people.

Hannah added that just two days after confirming that there would be a new self-harm offence, the UK government confirmed that there will be no protection for adults from content that is dangerous but legal, such as detailed method information on suicide. Instead, adults will be told to make changes to their settings if they don't want to see this content. Samaritans feel this is a hugely backwards step. Hannah explained how the point of this law is to regulate the internet, not for people to adjust their own browser settings – people experiencing suicidal thoughts actively seek information out. The Government have written tackling illegal suicide and self-harm content into the new law but are happy to leave dangerous content that is legal widely available for adults. It simply doesn't make sense.

Samaritans research with Swansea University has shown that age verification and restrictions across social media are easily bypassed by children. It was highlighted by participants that date of birth alone is not sufficient as age verification as using a fake birthday was a simple way to get around

this. A more comprehensive online safety regime for all ages will of course also increase protections for children: the current proposals create a two-tier approach to safety which opens the possibility of children being able to circumnavigate safety controls.

Hannah added how in December, Samaritans commissioned public opinion polling which found that the government's removal of protections from damaging content for over 18s goes directly against what the public wants in this bill. The public told Samaritans that they want to see stronger restrictions for dangerous suicide and self-harm content, that they think it can affect people of all ages and that they want the government to regulate rather than individuals having to take responsibility for keeping themselves safe.

The Bill has still got a way to go before it becomes law - it has gone through the Commons and is now in the House of Lords for further discussion and debate. Samaritans have been working with MPs and Peers to raise their recommendations to the Government and put forward amendments to the Bill. Samaritans are currently supporting amendments which would ensure that protections against harmful suicide and self-harm content applies to people of all ages on all platforms. Last week these amendments were debated in the Lords.

Hannah advised that in December, the Welsh Government had already given their consent to bring the bill into law. Samaritans will continue to involve their campaigners and people with lived experience to remind everyone why getting this right really matters, and working with Ofcom as they prepare for the bill to come into force.

4. Maggy Corkhill, Co-alc Alliance - Cocaethylene related suicide/sudden death

Maggy explained that the Co-Alc Alliance is funded by the Jacob Abraham Foundation and was set up by herself and bereaved families - Nicola Abraham of the Jacob Abraham Foundation, Nicola Smerdon of 4Tom and Nadine Taylor and Mandy Naylor of the Ginger Heart Foundation. The alliance offers counselling for young people and postvention support for families through the Jacob Abraham Foundation and 4 Tom.

Maggy explained how when alcohol and cocaine are taken together this creates cocaethylene which blocks the re-uptake of dopamine in the brain, associated with the mood-altering affects. Once formed, cocaethylene stays in the body three to five times longer than cocaine.

The Alliance carried out a survey on social media in 2020 and 2022 to find out more about people's experiences in their communities and had over 1000 respondents. 74% of people knew someone who had by suicide/sudden death after taking drugs and alcohol together. The survey found that many who had died did not have pre-existing contact with mental health services. Maggy added how there were also particular concerns around young people under the age of 25, the impact of cocaethylene on them when their brain is not fully developed. There are also concerns about how men can be less likely to talk about any mental health issues they may be experiencing, and turn to drink and drugs instead.

Maggy explained how excessive drinking is often seen as an acceptable part of culture in the UK and a way of coping. She continued that although suicide is a complex issues, we know that binge drinking can increase the likelihood of attempting suicide. Use of cocaine has become more popular amongst young people with many recreational users. It can become an acceptable form of socialising for some. Maggy talked about how drugs and alcohol are a dangerous combination with drugs often masking the effects of alcohol and drugs making them feel more alert. The effects of cocaethylene are also that it remains in people systems for days and alcohol and cocaine mixed together gives people intense high and increased negative effects. The alliance is also looking into links between cocaethylene and domestic abuse.

Maggy highlighted how more needs to be done to tackle this issue. She explained that more evidence is needed on the impact of cocaethylene and how there are issues with information

recorded by coroners. A full toxicology report is not always done, something the alliance want to see standardised. Maggy explained how this issue has a big impact on bereaved families who talk about feeling additional stigma when drugs have been involved and deters them from seeking postvention support.

She also added that the research paper (Alcohol and cocaine use prior to suspected suicide: Insights from toxicology) by James Bailey et al from March 2021 states that we need to "*reconsider the lack of emphasis given to substance use in many national suicide prevention strategies as well as the need for increased public education about, and public health interventions to address alcohol and cocaine use in suicidal acts.*"

The Alliance have partnered with the University of South Wales who are doing further research on this issue. The alliance is keen to continue to work with other organisations and to see the opportunities to see data from the Real Time Suicide Surveillance System (RTSS) for Wales and how that could help. Maggy also talked about a conference the Alliance is having on 12th July and shared links to register.

Jayne thanked Maggy for her presentation and asked if she could give an update on the conference at the next meeting.

Action: Maggy to give update on Co-Alc Alliance conference at next CPG.

5. Questions and next steps

Jayne asked Maggy about current research into cocaethylene. Maggy explained there has been research done by Brown University and Kings College in London who are also looking at research into links between sleep deprivation and suicide. Maggy added that we need to think about how we can raise awareness of this issue as many people do not see using alcohol and cocaine as an issue.

Maggy asked Hannah Swirsky about the Baton of Hope campaign and whether it would be worth having visibility at that as something to highlight Samaritans work. Hannah explained that the organisers of Baton of Hope had spoken to MPs at a recent meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Suicide in Westminster, which Samaritans is the secretariat for. Also the 3 Dad's Walking who are supporting Papyrus, are speaking at the July meeting.

Neil Ingham thanked Maggy for her presentation and added that there were some compelling points made about cocaethylene. He explained how it helps us think more about suicide risk in the round and we need to think about why drugs and alcohol are being used as coping mechanisms and may help us think about how to engage with at-risk men. Discussion took place in the chat about using music festivals to raise awareness of these issues given use of drugs and alcohol. Maggy explained it is an area she would like to explore alongside targeting the night-time economy and advertising on beer mats, pub doors etc. Emma added that Samaritans have a Festival branch of volunteers who travel across the UK providing 24 hour emotional support at various festivals and are attending In It Together and Green Man in Wales this year.

Sarah Rushworth asked whether more detailed reporting from coroners would help assess the impact of cocaethylene. Maggy explained how the alliance is hoping that data coming from the RTSS will help the alliance build further evidence. Ann John explained how the RTSS suicide data collected will be a relatively small number so there is still more work to do to establish meaningful detail behind the rates. It will take time for the new system to embed but there is lots of potential from what it could do.

6. Topic for next meeting and close

Jayne thanked everyone for coming and confirmed the next meeting will be on 21st September. Jayne offered to put Maggy in touch with the CPG on substance misuse so she could share this information with them. She also suggested writing a letter to the Deputy Minister on Mental Health and Wellbeing to ask for more research in this area.

Action: Jayne to put Maggy in contact with the CPG on substance misuse.

Action: Jayne to write letter to Deputy Minister on Mental Health and Wellbeing to ask for more research on cocaethylene.

Jayne also suggested she invite the Deputy Minister to the September meeting to present on plans for the next suicide and self-harm strategy.

Action: Jayne to invite the Deputy Minister to present on plans for the suicide prevention strategy at the September meeting.

Jayne suggested a presentation from Samaritans Cymru on the ONS suicide statistics for 2022, which are being released early September. Based on the findings of the ONS statistics, Jayne suggested a verbal update from the relevant Regional Coordinator for Suicide and self-harm prevention on what is being done to mitigate suicide risk in the areas with the highest rates of suicide.

There was also a suggestion to see if young people from the Amber Project could present at the next meeting with their theatre piece based on their lived experiences of mental health services. Ceri Fowler queried whether the presentation would be done by a Regional Coordinator or the National Coordinator in their role. Jayne confirmed that either could present to the group on the work being done in the area.

Action: Samaritans to present on ONS suicide statistics at the September meeting

Action: National Coordinator or a Regional Coordinator for suicide and self-harm prevention to present on work being done in their area linked to the information in the ONS statistics released in September.