

Stakeholder Hearing 11 Samaritans Represented by Fiona Malcolm

3 July 2014, 102 Petty France, London

LISTENER SCHEME

The Listener Scheme uses a peer-support model. Samaritans' volunteers from the community visit prisons to train and support prisoners, selected by the prison, to become Listeners. Once trained, Listeners provide confidential emotional support to other prisoners, following the same principles and practices as Samaritans volunteers.

The objectives of the Listener scheme are to reduce the number of self-inflicted deaths, reduce self-harm and help to alleviate the feelings of those in distress and struggling to cope. The presence of a Listener scheme is considered to create a better atmosphere and improve staff-prisoner relationships.

Fiona Malcom (FM) explained that the arrangement is that if a prison does not have a Listener scheme, or if, in exceptional circumstances, a prisoner does not wish to speak to a Listener, a prisoner can ask to see a Samaritans volunteer for face to face support. Prisoners can also contact Samaritans by telephone or by writing to them.

Access to Listeners

FM said that there is a huge variation in whether Listeners have access to prisoners during 'Early Days'. It depends on the management of the prison and how engaged the managers are with the scheme. Listeners may be at Reception and involved in induction, which is important; early awareness of the Listeners' scheme eases vulnerability. Anecdotally, where Listeners are not engaged early on, they tend to be less utilised across the prison overall. Samaritans would like the opportunity for Listeners to engage more with prisoners during the early days of custody.

FM told the panel that where engagement is good, prisoners will generally be able to see a Listener when they ask to and promotional materials will be widely available across the estate. Samaritans have produced videos for both female prisoners and men and young people which are intended to be played at induction as an introduction to the scheme. Where the scheme is understood well, the engagement is greater by the Governor and staff. Reluctance to encourage the scheme may come from a lack of understanding of the scheme and of its value.

FM drew the panel's attention to external evidence of the effectiveness of Peer to Peer support having a very significant impact.¹

¹ Systematic review of the effectiveness of peer-based interventions in prisons
http://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/131469/FullReport-hsdr02350.pdf

Impacts on the Listeners' Scheme

In some prisons the Samaritans found that there are challenges to training Listeners. For example, it has been found that initial selection by the prison can take too long and then prisoners are not always available for training at the agreed times. It is preferable for a prisoner to be at the prison for six months after training to make sure that the new skills are adequately supported by the trainer volunteers. As an organisation, Samaritans try to be as flexible as possible, but these barriers can impact on the numbers who are trained.

Samaritans feel that resource and population pressures are having an impact on the Listeners scheme. The increase in population means there is more sharing of cells and this can cause pressure on individuals as things can be more intense. Lack of staff resource means that there may not be staff available to take a Listener to a prisoner; this is becoming increasingly common.

There is telephone access to Samaritans available to prisoners and the Prison Service picks up the charges for the calls. Samaritans received almost 500,000 calls from prisoners in 2013, which was an increase of 20% on the previous year. Samaritans think that some of this increase may be due to prisoners being offered the phone to use rather than staff fetching a Listener. In new build prisons, and some prisons where there has been some refitting in cells, there is in-cell telephony and prisoners may phone Samaritans on these. Otherwise, including at night, staff may take a telephone to the prisoner or unlock both the Listener and the prisoner who has requested help, to go in the Listener suite. In 2013 there were 74,052 instances of prisoners talking to a Listener.

There are Listener suites in all prisons where Samaritans run the scheme. These are used during lock down, although this isn't always facilitated if staff numbers are limited. It is not normal procedure for a Listener to go to another prisoner's cell.

Listeners are trained to recognise and be aware of the behaviour of vulnerable people. Samaritans know, from their volunteers, that there is a lot of general support given to prisoners by Listeners. Listeners may 'wing walk' where permitted and so they are accessible to prisoners and can talk informally to people who they think may be vulnerable.

From the Samaritans perspective, generally a prisoner can continue to be a Listener when they move prisons. If the Samaritans volunteer support team changes to a different branch, the Listener will continue their ongoing support and training with this branch.

In YOIs, the service is provided by fully trained Listeners, Under 18 juvenile establishments do not operate Listener schemes but Samaritans volunteers can provide support to young people struggling to cope, if invited to do so by the prison.

CHARACTERISTICS OF 18-24 YEAR OLDS

Samaritans collect limited information about those who contact them as the service is anonymous. They don't have information specifically about this age group. However, they surveyed their volunteers who support Listeners and they feel that Listeners are well utilised among younger people. They are not aware of resistance to using the scheme by this age group and there doesn't appear to be a problem regarding recruiting in YOIs.

Samaritans have looked into what makes a young person particularly vulnerable for the Harris Review via the prison support officers. They are particularly vulnerable when they

first arrive: they are frightened, alone, they have no one to talk to, they have feelings of isolation and they are emotional. Young people will have limited experience of imprisonment and when they are being transferred they are particularly vulnerable. Young people are also particularly vulnerable during times of change, including parole. They tend to have less emotional resilience, a lack of self worth, a lack of control and a sense of defeat.

Samaritans would be happy to be involved in discussions looking at developing coping mechanisms for this age group; they go into schools and have a programme and course material for teachers; they could consider extending this into prisons.

INFORMATION SHARING

FM explained that the information that a Listener hears is not shared. Samaritans' service, including the Listener scheme, is confidential except in a very few specific cases, which include informed consent from a prisoner to pass on information and where Samaritans receive a court order requiring them to divulge information. Samaritans maintain confidentiality even after the death of a prisoner.

Confidentiality allows people to feel safe and therefore more likely to be open about their feelings. Exploring feelings alleviates distress and helps people to reach a better understanding of their situation and the options open to them. Giving people time and undivided attention meets an emotional need and helps those struggling to cope.

FM said that an officer will almost certainly know when a prisoner is talking to a Listener, but a Listener won't tell an officer who they are talking to or that they need to look out for a particular prisoner. Listeners encourage prisoners to talk to prison staff and to use other support groups.

Some prisons have Listeners in the Visitors reception area and a visitor may flag if they have a concern; the Listener will then try and informally engage with the person identified to make them aware of the support available.

STAFF AND CULTURE IN PRISONS

Samaritans appreciate and understand that there won't be an increase in staff resource, but incorporating information about the Listener scheme in the POELT (Prison Officer Entry Level Training) would be beneficial.

Samaritans would like more awareness training for staff generally, to enable them to provide more emotional support to vulnerable prisoners. Samaritans have the knowledge and experience of training people to become aware of signs of distress and anxiety and how to deal with it, they train frontline rail industry staff, for example.

ACCT

Currently Listeners are not involved with the ACCT process at all. However, speaking to a Listener may be suggested as part of an ACCT care plan.

In some prisons Listeners may attend Safer Custody meetings and raise issues, but there are not as many Safer Custody officers as there used to be and fewer meetings. NOMS is addressing this by re-instating the Safer Custody officer role. It is best practice for Listeners to attend Safer Custody meetings, partly because it increases the status of Listeners and the Listener scheme. Volunteers are not always invited to Safer Custody meetings.

FOLLOWING A SELF-INFLICTED DEATH

Following a self-inflicted death, Samaritans' local branch would always be pleased to be invited to support the prison so that the volunteers can go into the prison to support the Listener, staff and prisoners. They also encourage prisons to give the Samaritans' contact details to the bereaved family.