Towards a suicide-safer internet

February 2022
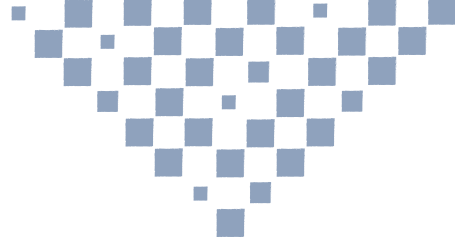
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Foreword

The online environment has become part of the fabric of our lives for many of us. It can be a vital source of information and support and for people experiencing self-harm and suicidal feelings, it can be a place to go without fear of the stigma which still too often exists. There is a huge amount of positive, helpful and inspiring content online that can help people who are struggling, but there is no doubt that the internet contains harmful content which can exacerbate and encourage self-harm and suicidal behaviour.

The Online Safety Bill, new legislation being proposed by the UK Government, is an unprecedented opportunity to make a suicide-safer internet, reducing and restricting access to harmful content while enabling online support to flourish. But the Government has to get it right. The new law must ensure that harmful suicide and self-harm content is tackled for children and adults across the UK and in all corners of the internet. Without strengthening the current proposal, the Government risks undermining the national suicide prevention strategies for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and decreases the opportunity the Bill offers in playing a major part in helping to reduce suicides.

At Samaritans, we are clear what needs to be done and we are committed to playing our part. We have already worked with industry to develop guidelines and best practice for managing suicide and self-harm content. But, it is only new legislation that can compel platforms and sites to meet a comprehensive set of standards, and usher in a new era of online safety.

This report sets out what we'd like to see from new legislation and we hope it provides the impetus for action now that will help to save lives now and in the future.

Julie Bentley
CEO, Samaritans
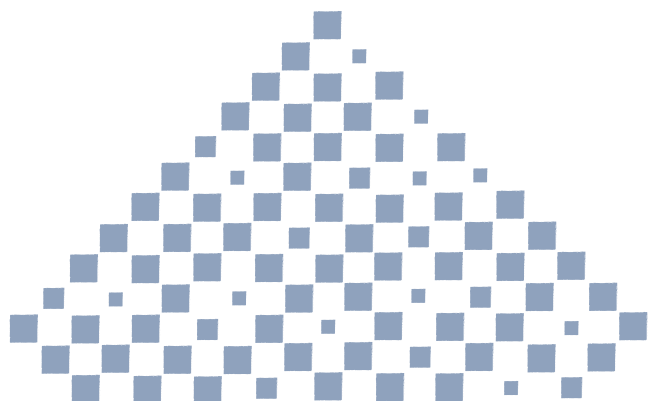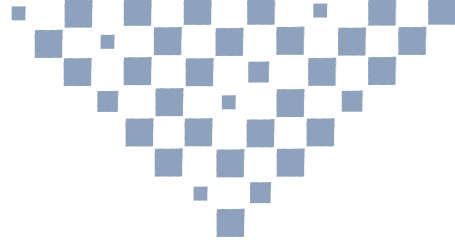
Introduction

Suicide is a major public health problem in the UK, with the highest rates among men aged 45 – 49. It is the biggest killer of young people aged 16 – 24, and the suicide rate for young women is now at its highest on record.[1] Self-harm, a major risk factor for suicide, is also becoming much more prevalent, having tripled among young people over the last 15 years.[2] 1 in 15 (6.4%) adults in England report that they have self-harmed.[2]

Suicide and self-harm are complex, and are rarely caused by a single factor. However, we do know that an individual's engagement with content online can directly, or indirectly, impact on their risk of suicide. A national inquiry into suicides by young people in England found that in 26% of deaths in under 20s, and in 13% of deaths in 20-24 year olds, the internet had been used in a way that was related to suicide; with 13% searching the internet for information on a suicide method, 4% visiting websites that encouraged suicide and 10% communicating suicidal ideas or intent online amongst the under 20 age group.[3]

Whilst engaging with content online may be harmful, the online environment can also be an invaluable resource for people experiencing self-harm and suicidal feelings, providing opportunities for people to seek crisis support, share their journeys of recovery, and communicate with others who have similar experiences openly.

Across the UK, governments are committed to reducing deaths by suicide – an ambition that we all share. The Online Safety Bill is an important part of the picture in achieving this ambition.

Suicide is a major public health problem in the UK
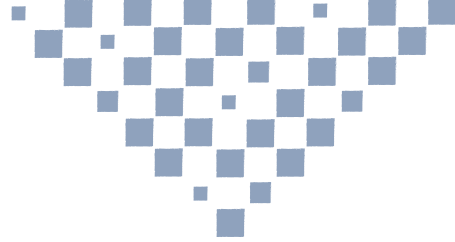
The highest rates among men aged

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It is the biggest killer of young people aged

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The suicide rate for young women is now at its highest on record

The online environment: what can be helpful and what can be harmful

The role of viewing, posting or engaging with online content in suicide and self-harm risk is complex and the evidence on these issues is still developing. The current evidence base informs us that the internet can be both a helpful resource for those experiencing suicidal thoughts or self-harm, as well as a potentially harmful source of information and exposure.

Research shows that the way that people use the internet varies depending on their current level of distress. For example, people in low levels of distress typically browse content to explore different support options and to hear from other people and their stories in order to gain a greater understanding of their own experience. Contrastingly, people in high levels of distress tend to show purposeful browsing, such as specifically looking for information on methods of harm.[4] Whilst people experiencing intense suicidal feelings may actively avoid online help, individuals who are less distressed are often receptive to sites hosting helpful and positive content as well as support groups and information[4]. An individual's emotional state can fluctuate and change over time, including within the same day, and therefore, their viewing and searching habits can also change throughout a single day.

Some of the reasons that people may post, search for, or engage with self-harm and suicide content include (in no particular order):

- Wanting to find out more about what they're feeling and experiencing

- Finding a place to speak openly without fear of judgement

- Reading stories or connecting with others with similar experiences

- Seeking a supportive online community where they can get peer support

- Finding support for themselves or someone they know

- Raising awareness of self-harm or suicide prevention

- Searching for information about methods of harm

- Accessing immediate support– this is particularly important for users in crisis or waiting to access support from health professionals

Users may also stumble upon harmful suicide and self-harm content by accident or have this content pushed towards them by platforms and sites. Due to the large volume of harmful suicide and self-harm content online, the likelihood of people inadvertently encountering this content is high, with this risk increasing as a result of algorithms and site designs that can push people towards this content.

Platforms and sites: online spaces where users can generate content and/or communicate with each other, this ranges from social media sites to online forums and from search engines to gaming sites to name a few.
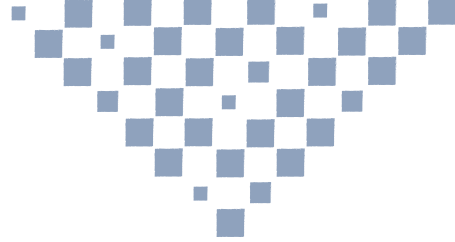
What can be helpful

Research has shown that the internet is used by people seeking peer support, as well as to document their own journeys of recovery and connect themselves with emergency support when in high levels of distress. Given that self-harm and suicidal thinking can be difficult to talk about directly and continues to carry stigma, access to good quality advice and support online can be an incredibly important tool for those seeking support.

Evidence shows that many individuals who self-harm do not seek help as a result of a concern about stigmatising attitudes[5], with this stigmatisation also discouraging people from talking about their suicidal thoughts, particularly amongst older age groups.[6] The online environment offers an opportunity to access and communicate with support services or with others who have similar experiences, without fear of judgement. This may come in a variety of forms, ranging from directly seeking an online peer support group, or sharing a personal story of recovery on social media.

For some, the internet provides a space of belonging – offering an opportunity to not only interact with others who may have similar experiences, but also to share their own voice and their own journey of recovery. Research shows that people post self-harm related content online to communicate and connect with others who have had similar experiences, seeing it as an opportunity to disclose feelings without judgement.[7] This shows the positive power of the internet in offering support for people, particularly as part of displaying hope, being heard, and supporting one another.

> 66 To have another person say 'I get it' is so validating 99
>
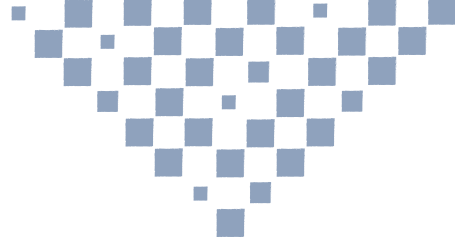> **– Emma* who has personal experience of suicide and self-harm[8]**

In addition to being beneficial for the author/poster of content, being exposed to positive messages of recovery also provides benefit to the user viewing the content, with research finding that engagement with messages of hope can have a positive impact on mood.[9] The immediacy of support that the internet provides means that people struggling can receive emotional support quickly, particularly beneficial to those who are waiting to access professional mental health services.[10]

As previously highlighted, internet usage can depend on the user's context at the time, particularly considering their levels of distress. In moments of crisis, people have been shown to see online engagement as supportive, feeling a sense of community to seek support from.[11] Additionally, there are examples where the internet provides valuable access to information for charities and crisis support lines – such as the Google OneBox 'help is available' pop-up alert when someone searches for content related to suicide.

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*All names have been changed throughout this report
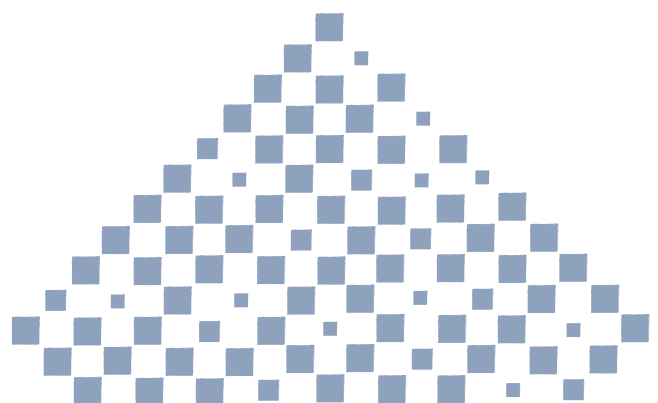
❯ What can be helpful

As the UK Government seeks to tighten regulation of online spaces, it is important to preserve the support available online and ensure it is easy to find and accessible. This includes encouraging the use of signposted support (to support that can be accessed 24 hours a day, every day either online or offline) and embedded support (such as information resources and self-care activities), as well as promoting positive content such as suicide prevention awareness and people's stories of recovery.

The internet provides unique opportunities for suicide prevention and a mechanism for people to directly seek support from others with similar experiences, as well as giving people access to online supportive resources, self-help tools, online chat, online counselling and crisis lines.[12] The preservation of these spaces alongside the safe and sensitive management of self-harm and suicide content (in accordance with our Online Excellence Programme's industry guidelines for sites hosting user-generated content) will enable the online environment to become suicide-safer.

❝ We combat the shame that comes with dealing with such stigmatised and painful feelings... it is my experience that opening up to people online has helped me to subsequently talk to support services in real life ❞

James who has personal experience of suicide and self-harm[8]
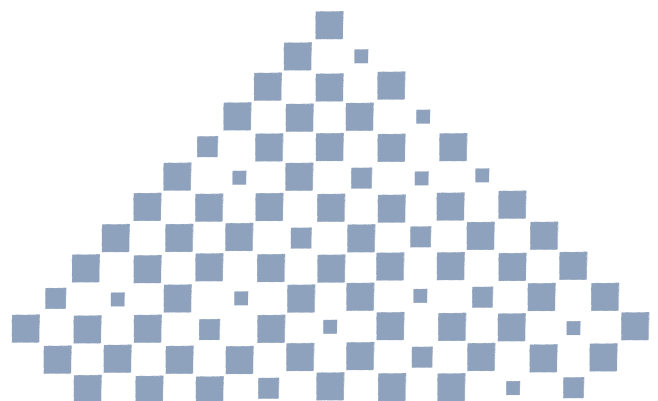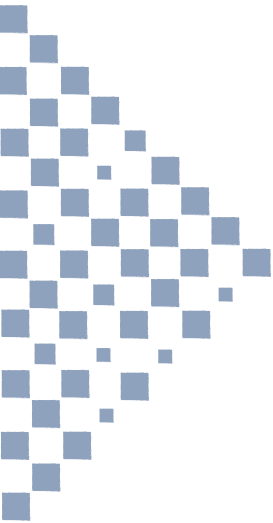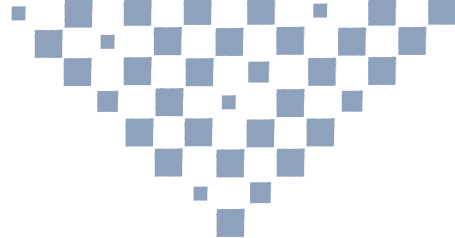
What can be harmful

Whilst the internet can be an invaluable resource for those experiencing feelings of self-harm and suicide, it can also provide access to content that is distressing, triggering and instructive and that may encourage, maintain or exacerbate self-harm and suicidal behaviours. Any suicide and self-harm content can have the potential to be distressing; research shows that graphic descriptions or depictions of self-harm and suicide and portraying suicide or self-harm as desirable can be particularly distressing.
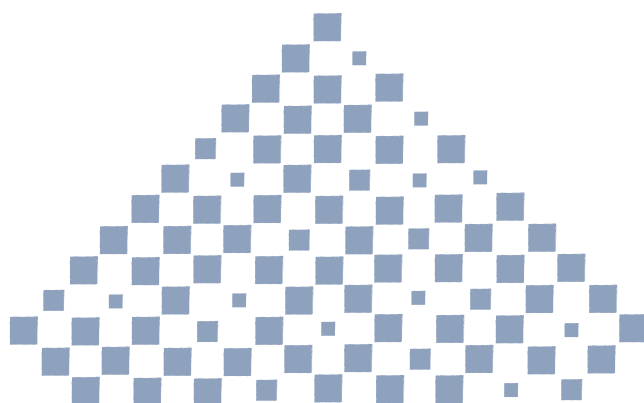
Therefore, despite the internet being a mechanism for support, there are risks associated with particular types of content online.

Harmful content online that we believe poses a significant risk includes:

- Detailed and instructive information about suicide or self-harm methods

- Graphic images relating to self-harm or suicide

- Live streams or recorded videos of suicidal or self-harming behaviour

- Posts encouraging, glamourising or celebrating suicide or self-harm

- Posts from people seeking or encouraging suicide or self-harm pacts

- Posts relating to suicide or self-harm challenges

With individuals moving in and out of vulnerability throughout their lives, and given that levels of distress can fluctuate sometimes over the course of a single day, these harms can pose a risk to people when this content is available to view.

In England, Wales (under the 1961 Suicide Act) and Northern Ireland (under the 1966 Criminal Justice Act [Northern Ireland]), it is an offence to encourage or assist the suicide of another person – any content intentionally encouraging an individual to end their life is therefore illegal – and in Scotland, an individual assisting another to take their own life could face prosecution for murder, culpable homicide or reckless endangerment. However, content that glamourises suicide, for example, or promotes and encourages self-harm remains legal, despite being evidently harmful.
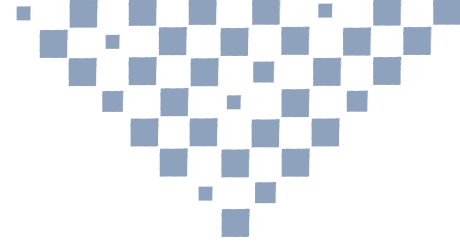
There is evidence that content presenting self-harm and suicide behaviours may be contagious to other users viewing it, with young people (aged up to 24) being the most susceptible to this risk. This contagion effect may be caused, or its likelihood increased, when there is an over identification with the user who posts the content, increasing the risk of imitative suicides or self-harm.[13] We also know that certain public discourse can influence how people behave, particularly with regards to suicide and self-harm content. Where public discourse, within media coverage for example, is explicit in a method or sensationalises suicide and self-harm, imitational suicidal behaviour can occur.[14] Content that promotes, or is instructive to, self-harm poses a risk to people due to social contagion as well as informing people of harmful methods.

In addition to posing risks of contagion or imitative behaviour, harmful content online can directly or indirectly provide information on self-harm and suicide. Sharing methods of harm can put users at increased risk. This includes sharing details or instructions around methods, such as suggesting equipment or places to harm yourself, as well as comparisons of the effectiveness of different methods. Research evidences that this content not only distracts users from signposted support[15] but also increases the likelihood of an individual taking their own life through increased access to means.
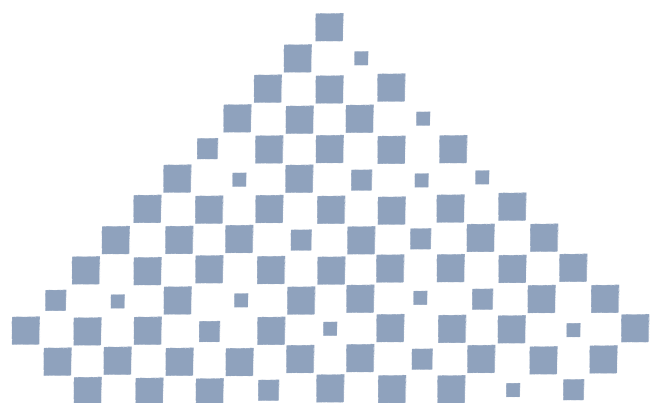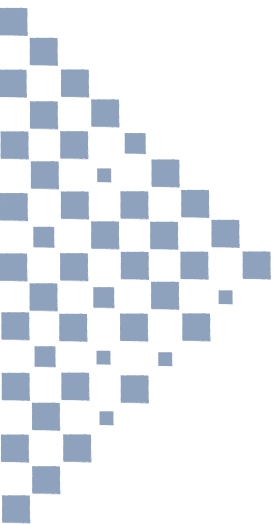
What could a suicide-safer internet look like

What can Government and industry do to make the internet safer?

The UK Government has the opportunity to ensure the internet is safer and more positive when it comes to suicide and self-harm content.

78%
of Samaritans' lived experience panellists surveyed agree that new laws are needed to make online spaces safer for users[8]

Where harmful content exists online, the Government needs to ensure that legislation enables the effective removal of such content to reduce suicide risk without inadvertently removing supportive content. Almost three-quarters (73%) of Samaritans' lived experience panel respondents believe that online spaces can be helpful for individuals experiencing self-harm and suicidal feelings, and it is imperative that this support route is not taken away.[8]

The Online Safety Bill offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to maximise the support that the internet has to offer, whilst minimising exposure to content that can be harmful in relation to suicide and self-harm. This Bill should build on the work of the Online Excellence Programme, with the industry guidelines principles underpinning regulation.

This is what Samaritans wants to see from the Online Safety Bill:

1. A new law on assisting self-harm

Encouraging or assisting suicide is a criminal offence in England and Wales under the Suicide Act 1961 (as amended by the Coroners and Justice Act 2009) and in Northern Ireland under the Criminal Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. There is no specific crime of assisting suicide in Scotland, however, it is possible that a person assisting another to take their own life could face prosecution for murder, culpable homicide or reckless endangerment. With online 'suicide challenges' rising in prominence, including those that include elements of self-harm[16], the absence of legislation around encouraging self-harm is concerning.

We're calling for the Government to implement the Law Commission's 2020 recommendation that a new offence of encouraging or assisting serious self-harm is introduced in England and Wales as part of reforming Communications Offences. It should also, working with government in Northern Ireland and Scotland, consider the implications of extending this new offence to those nations.

It is essential that a new offence does not criminalise at-risk people, or lead to greater stigmatisation of individuals who speak openly about self-harm online. The police and Crown Prosecution Service should be made aware of the risks of over-criminalising and should be confident in discerning between individuals at-risk and in distress with intentional bad actors prior to the creation of the offence, working with people with lived experience to inform this work.
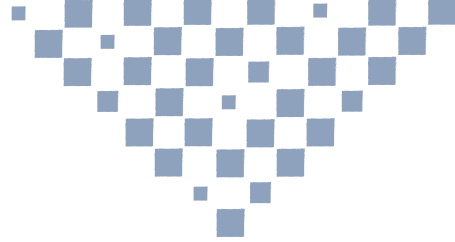
2. Suicide and self-harm as a priority area

The draft Online Safety Bill outlines different categories of content:

⟩ **Illegal content:** requiring all platforms to address illegal content online

⟩ **Legal but harmful content for children:** requiring all platforms to address content that is legal but harmful for services likely to be accessed by children

⟩ **Legal but harmful content:** requiring only platforms with large reach and functionality to address legal but harmful content for those aged 18 years and over

Suicide and self-harm content online must be considered a priority area within the aim of making the internet safer. The Government has already confirmed that illegal content encouraging or assisting suicide will be set out as a priority offence in the new law. However, the Bill should also prioritise legal but harmful suicide and self-harm content, in addition to prioritising illegal self-harm content once a new offence for encouraging or assisting serious self-harm is introduced.

3. Safe for all

New laws should ensure that all individuals receive the necessary protections online across all platforms and sites that host user-generated content. Within the UK Government's draft Online Safety Bill, only 'Category One' services*

will be required to address content that is legal but harmful to adults, presenting a missed opportunity to safeguard adults from harmful suicide and self-harm content. This omission will mean smaller sites – and possibly larger sites with limited functionality like Wikipedia – where we know harmful suicide and self-harm content exists, will not be required to moderate any legal but harmful suicide and self-harm content for those over 18, despite this content affecting people of all ages. Between 2011 and 2015, 151 people who had been in touch with mental health services and who died by suicide were known to have visited websites that encouraged suicide or shared information about methods of harm, 124 of these people were aged over 25.[17]

Focusing efforts on harmful content on larger sites risks a shift in user patterns, concentrating more harmful content on smaller and unmoderated sites. A recent systematic review looking at the impact of suicide and self-harm related videos and photographs found that potentially harmful content massed on sites with poor moderation.[18] Incomplete legislation would allow for such sites to continue exposing vulnerable individuals to harmful content.

The Bill should require all platforms and sites to moderate legal but harmful suicide and self-harm content for all of their users.

78% of Samaritans' lived experience panellists surveyed believe that current proposals (only covering the largest and most popular platforms when it comes to over 18s) should include smaller online spaces too.[8]

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* Services and platforms with a high reach and high functionality
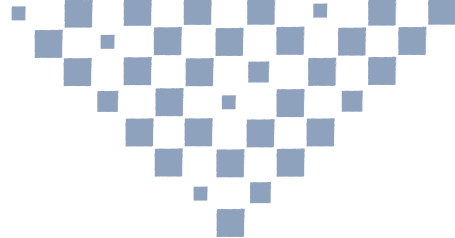
4. Forming a robust code of practice

With forthcoming legislation appointing Ofcom as the new regulator for online activity, it is imperative that there is an effective code of practice for suicide and self-harm content online as an urgent priority, operating in an informed manner by working closely with subject matter experts (such as people with lived experience, third sector organisations and academics).

The identification of suicide and self-harm as a priority area needing urgent attention would enable Ofcom to establish robust processes supporting platforms and sites to ensure that harmful content is effectively dealt with online, helping the internet to become a safer place. These processes must reflect the nuance that is required in relation to suicide and self-harm content online, particularly in ensuring that helpful suicide and self-harm content is not inadvertently removed. With some content being harmful for some yet innocuous for others, and with the impact on an individual enhanced when they are constantly bombarded with that content, Ofcom must navigate this to support platforms and sites to deal with this 'grey area' of content. As new evidence emerges in relation to the impact of suicide and self-harm content to users and authors, these processes should be regularly reviewed to reflect the changing evidence base and any emerging trends online.

Initially, areas for action should include the removal of information regarding methods of suicide and self-harm. It is important that information regarding methods is removed from all platforms, both large and small, due to the level of harm that it can cause to anyone.

## 5. Algorithms, search engines and online resources

The Online Safety Bill, and subsequent codes of practice, should ensure that sites and platforms take a proactive approach to reducing harmful self-harm and suicide content on their platform. Existing algorithms on sites have the potential to push self-harm and suicide content towards users – where platforms make suggestions based on previous browsing, this should be disabled for self-harm and suicide content.

Given how easily information on suicide methods can be found online, search engines should be instructed to delist or bury potentially harmful content whilst ensuring that positive content is surfaced and accessible. Sites and platforms should adopt an ethical approach, ensuring that positive content (including helpline contact information) is surfaced at the top of searches when harmful content is searched for. Furthermore, existing online resources should be improved by incorporating interactive elements such as live chats, self-help tools, lived experience content, and opportunities to interact with peers.[19]

Similarly, autocomplete searches should be reviewed, with the functionality turned off for harmful searches relating to methods of harm and associated equipment. Suicides are preventable with timely, evidence-based interventions and by incorporating these changes to minimise harmful content and maximise support, the online environment can create opportunities to intervene.

74% **of Samaritans' lived experience panel** respondents felt that all online spaces should display helpline numbers or signposting information related to suicide or mental health support.
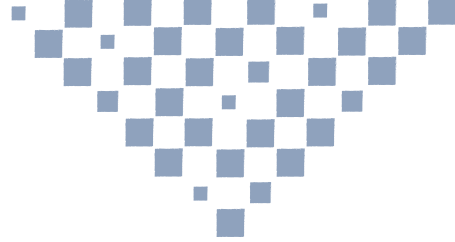
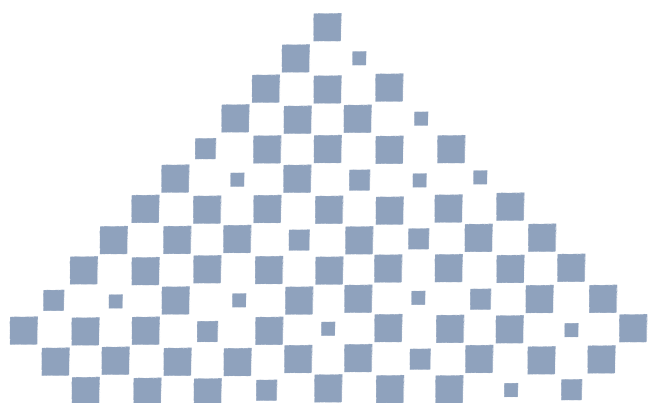# How Samaritans is working to create a suicide-safer internet

The Online Excellence Programme, established in 2019, aims to promote consistently high standards across the sector to make the internet a safer place, and contributing to the aim of reducing deaths by suicide. The Programme achieves this by providing a centralised space for those working in and around the industry to find support and guidance, providing opportunities to convene and share best practice.
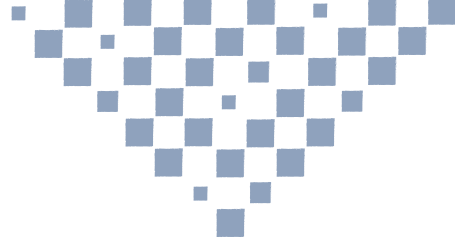
The programme involves:

i. **A Research and Insight Programme:** to better understand the impact of self-harm and suicide content online, investigating what makes content harmful, when and to whom.

ii. **Industry guidelines:** our industry guidelines (developed in collaboration with Government, industry, academics and third sector organisations) support sites and platforms in managing self-harm and suicide related content online using safe and sensitive approaches. The guidelines are for all sites and platforms, ranging from smaller online community forums to global social media and video sharing platforms.

iii. **Hub of online safety resources:** we produce and distribute a series of resources to help people to stay safe online when posting or viewing content relating to self-harm and suicide. Co-designed with people with personal experience, these resources provide people with support and advice on how they can navigate the internet safely.

iv. **Online Harms Advisory Service:** bespoke and confidential advice is available to all working in the sector, ranging from sites and platforms, to voluntary sector organisations and those working in mental health services. The service helps to support and manage issues relating to self-harm and suicide online, working towards reducing the risk of harm this content can pose to users.

Find out more here: samaritans.org/about-samaritans/research-policy/internet-suicide

By working with platforms, the Online Excellence Programme has formed core principles for <u>regulating suicide and self-harm content online.</u>

i. Understand the impact of self-harm and suicide content online – all sites and platforms must take proactive steps to understand the potential benefits and risks associated with self-harm and suicide content online and how it applies to their sites.

ii. Establish clear accountability – all sites and platforms should be required to recognise self-harm and suicide as serious harms, ensuring policies are in place to protect users with accountability for upholding these policies sitting at a senior level.

iii. Have a robust policy for addressing self-harm and suicide content – all sites and platforms should proactively limit the volume of harmful content that is shared, with mechanisms in place to address it if it does appear. These policies should also be translated into accessible community guidelines for users, explaining what can and cannot be posted about self-harm and suicide (and why).

iv. Put user friendly processes in place to report self-harm and suicide content – all sites and platforms should ensure that users can easily report concerning content or behaviour, with those reported from people needing urgent help prioritised for human review.

v. Moderation – all sites and platforms should be required to moderate user-generated content to ensure that suicide and self-harm policies are successfully implemented. Where this is done by human moderation, individuals should be provided with high-quality training and support and where this is operated through artificial intelligence, this should complement and not replace human moderation.

vi. Reduce access to harmful suicide and self-harm content that could be harmful for users – all sites and platforms should take steps to reduce access to harmful suicide and self-harm content by ensuring algorithms do not push suicide and self-harm content towards users, reviewing autocomplete searches and blocking harmful site searches.

vii. Take steps to support user wellbeing – all sites and platforms should ensure that user wellbeing is at the heart of their approach. This should include signposting and embedding support, and prioritising support if content is moderated. Additionally, sites and platforms should establish ways of promoting positive and supportive content such as wellbeing information, messaging that encourages help-seeking and stories of hope and recovery.

viii. Communicate sensitively with users in distress, taking a personalised approach where possible – all sites and platforms should use safe and empathetic approaches, remembering that the user could be experiencing high levels of distress.

ix. Work collaboratively and demonstrate transparency - all sites and platforms should be transparent about how they manage self-harm and suicide content on their sites. They should also work collaboratively with the industry to ensure insights and best practice are shared.

x. Establish processes to support the wellbeing of staff exposed to self-harm and suicide content – all sites and platforms should protect and promote the wellbeing of employees and volunteers working with self-harm and suicide content. Wellbeing support should be provided to moderators, as well as others across an organisation who may be exposed to this content. This should include specialist training, psychological support and regular check-ins as appropriate.

Conclusion

The Online Safety Bill presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to make the internet a safer place.

Like suicide and self-harm itself, understanding the impact of self-harm and suicide content online is complex. It is crucial that policy and regulation in this space remains relevant and reflects the emerging evidence base on the impact of the online environment on suicide and self-harm.

What can be helpful for one user can be extremely distressing to others. Similarly, what can be distressing for one user at one moment in time, may later be supportive for the same individual

at a different moment in time. This complexity should not deter us from making the internet a suicide-safer place. Whilst certain content falls in this 'grey area', there is certain suicide and self-harm content that is clearly harmful to all and action needs to be taken now to get it removed.

In doing so, the online environment can help minimise harm in all our lives while continuing to be an integral support mechanism.
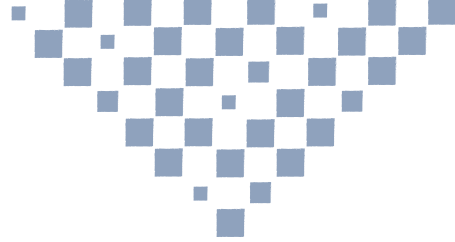
Glossary

Samaritans applies the following definitions for suicide and self-harm:

Self-harm: any deliberate act of self-poisoning or self-injury without suicidal intent. This excludes accidents, substance misuse and eating disorders, as well as episodes of self-harm where the person was trying to take their own life.

Suicide: the act of intentionally ending one's life. This is caused by many factors, including depression and mental illness, stress, financial problems, relationship breakdown, bereavement and abuse.

Platforms and sites: online spaces where users can generate content and/or communicate with each other except comment sections on news media websites, this ranges from social media sites to online forums and from search engines to gaming sites to name a few.

While the above are Samaritans definitions, it should be acknowledged that there are alternative definitions of self-harm, with some definitions encompassing eating disorders and drug misuse. In some clinical and academic settings (particularly in the UK), the term 'self-harm' is often used to refer to when a person harms themselves, irrespective of whether they do so with the intention of taking their own life.
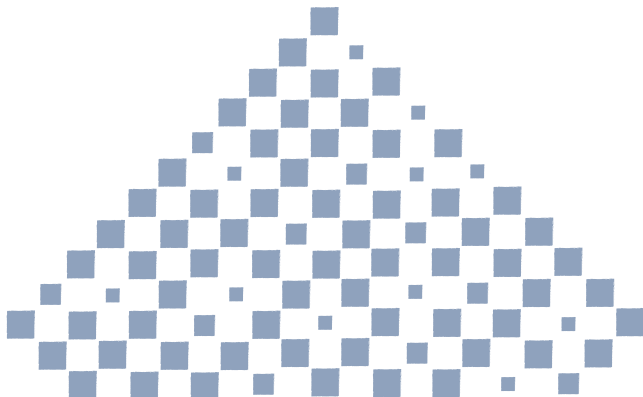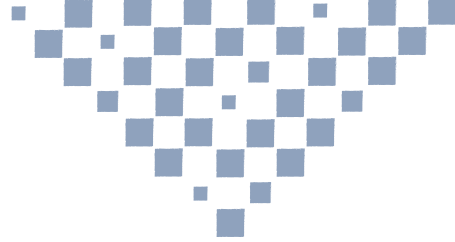
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