# Providing a robust digital lifeline for people in crisis: Samaritans

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Samaritans is one of the UK's leading charities, providing 24-hour emotional support for people who are distressed or struggling to cope. Suicide prevention is a priority. Samaritans volunteers offer a sympathetic, non-judgemental ear via phone, email and in person at 201 branches around the UK and the Republic of Ireland and they work with prisons, the military, schools and some large workplaces. They also offer Samaritans Self-Help, an app to help people manage their emotional state and find strategies to improve their mental wellbeing. Samaritans volunteers are always available "for anyone who needs someone".

### Digital transformation to make sure services are 'always on'

Samaritans has always been ready to adapt its service delivery to align with how people live and work. Largely a face-to-face service when it started in 1953, most people probably now think of it as phone-led – but a growing number of users prefer to engage digitally. Partly to make sure they can do so, digital transformation is a priority for the organisation.

*"Our services must be relevant and easy for users to engage with. Younger generations, in particular, conduct their lives online," says Paul Saklatvala, Samaritans' assistant director of IT.*

*"It's important that everyone who wants to talk to us can do it in the way that feels comfortable. Increasingly, digital communications will dominate and so we must have digital systems that are reliable and resilient against threats like cyber attacks."*

Until recently the organisation's core digital infrastructure was in the Surrey HQ and managed day to day by the in-house IT team.

*"The time was right to move to public cloud for many reasons. For example, we needed to update our systems and more and more aspects of these were being offered as software as a service (SaaS). We knew public cloud would give our systems the resilience they need, help us save money and give us more flexibility in how we operate,"* says Paul.

### A trusted partner

*"We wanted to commit to a solution for a minimum of five years so it was important to make the right choice and we asked an external consultant to help us identify the best option."*

*"They helped us identify Amazon Web Services (AWS) as our provider and we wanted to procure this through a partner who could work with us first on the migration to cloud and then, later, re-architecting our systems. Ours is a unique organisation and we were clear that we wanted a genuine partner able to understand what we need and how we work."*

Samaritans scoped the project with an existing supplier but it was a relatively small business with limited experience of public cloud and insufficient understanding of non-profits, so they decided to look around.

*"We found Jisc and they 'got' us from day one,"* says Paul. *"It is a non-profit with plenty of experience of working with third sector organisations and they know where we're coming from."*

Jisc cloud services is an AWS Consulting Partner with a dedicated AWS delivery team. The team's specialist expertise and Samaritans' commitment to the project enabled the migration to happen in just six weeks, helped by the fact that Samaritans trusted us to engage directly with their suppliers.

A key deliverable was to keep downtime to a minimum to avoid disrupting contact with vulnerable members of the public.

*"It helped that our busiest time for callers is at night so Jisc could do most of the work in the daytime and keep services running smoothly when they were in most demand. We mostly left them to it, they quickly became a very trusted partner,"* says Paul.

### Ironing out the glitches

Phase two of the programme, in the first half of 2021, was to re-architect the charity's systems to take full advantage of a range of benefits offered by AWS, including scalability, resilience and better security.

*"Jisc's AWS team are helping us to get the most from cloud because they can handle it all, from the redesign to implementation,"* says Paul. *"Our in-house IT team have some experience with AWS but Jisc are the experts and they are freeing our own people up to focus on other things."*

A regular, weekly call formed the cornerstone of this four-month programme, providing an opportunity to review the past week's work and plan the next. Any necessary supplier meetings

were set up in these calls, sometimes with participation from Samaritans but often without.

In between, Samaritans' project managers had near real-time updates and they could always chat with us about progress via a ticketing system. This approach ensured a continuous flow of information and speedy progress. Even Covid-19 didn't slow things down.

Were there blips along the way? "Yes," says Paul.

*"For example, one supplier's requirements changed several times and each time Jisc delivered what they'd been asked for. But rather than letting this repeated work slow things down, they stepped in to keep things on track by proposing and delivering a resolution."*

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### Robust, cost-effective connectivity
Our cloud team also supported Samaritans to migrate SharePoint into cloud, giving them security benefits and the freedom to scale up or down so they only pay only for the storage they need.

Cost savings like this are an important benefit, as they are for every charity, enabling them to invest more of their income in service delivery. As part of our Managed AWS service we provide all our customers with ongoing advice and guidance on best practice and on how to extract best value from cloud.

*"We get monthly reports from Jisc and these always include recommendations on what more we can do to save cost,"* says Paul.

At the time of writing the project was nearing completion. The organisation expects it will help them give service users a more responsive, resilient service with less unscheduled downtime. And staff were already enjoying more flexible working. The charity's 250 employees can now work from home and at times that suit their own lives and the needs of the business.

*"Our original infrastructure was limiting, staff had to be in our offices to use it,"* says Paul.

*"Fewer people want to be constrained like that now and it's a benefit to the organisation if we can let people to be productive in ways that suit them."*

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