Samaritans have been working in partnership with the rail industry to reduce suicide on the railway since 2010, through a contracted relationship with Network Rail. In that time, we have built strong working relationships with the British Transport Police (BTP) and have come to understand the strengths in knowledge and operations that BTP have in suicide prevention work. We welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to the Justice Committee on the Railway Policing (Scotland) Bill and will be commenting on “the impact, if any, which the devolution of railway policing will have in terms of retaining specialist skills and knowledge built up by British Transport Police officers”.

We initially provided a response to the 2016 Scottish Government consultation on the proposed integration, which can be found here.

In 2015/16 we saw rail suicides fall by around 12%\(^1\) across the rail network in Scotland, England and Wales. We believe that this partnership, and the specific skills and expertise of BTP in suicide prevention on the rail network, is a part of that story. It is crucial then that this work continues. We are pleased to see that the Chief Constable intends to retain a specialist railway policing function with the skills, knowledge and experience that BTP officers and staff have built.\(^2\) With no firm guarantees on specific areas at this stage however, we would like to draw the committee’s attention to those skills and expertise we believe are vital.

BTP have specialist knowledge of suicide and mental health issues in rail settings, which must be protected and encouraged. Their understanding of rail operations and the complex issues that rail suicide presents is important not only in preventing suicide on the rail network, but in ensuring that railways begin to run again after suicide related incidents and that staff are looked after following such trauma. Their specific understanding of rail suicides, as well as expertise in approaching vulnerable people on the railway network, come from both experience and the officers trained in Managing Suicidal Contacts (a Samaritans run course in recognising and approaching vulnerable people on the railway network). Over 100 BTP officers have been trained to date, with many more planned this year. It is imperative that those officers not only be able to continue to use these skills, but can continue to attend suicide prevention training.

At a strategic level, BTP work closely with Samaritans in Scotland and train companies to tackle suicide. They are key members of the Rail Industry Suicide Strategy Group, which brings together stakeholders in the rail industry and suicide prevention leads to consider how we might best tackle suicide on the network together. BTP also often support multi-agency suicide prevention groups. Their


proficiency in this specific area is a key part of wider suicide prevention work and we would urge that they continue to be able to contribute.

Much of the work in preventing and reducing suicide on the network would be much less achievable without the suicide prevention data BTP gathers and supplies. BTP intelligence is vital for police operations which lead to interventions of suicidal and vulnerable people on the railway by police officers. It is also crucial for understanding how we might reduce future suicides on the network. For this data to continue being useful, it is imperative that officers continue to report lifesaving interventions on the railway into rail reporting structures. Consideration therefore needs to take place of how this information would flow within the new structures. BTP also have an established and extremely effective process of rolling out suicide prevention plans which have reduced the risk of suicidal people returning to attempt to take their lives on the railway. It’s similarly vital that there is a continued use of the referral lines that have been put in place specifically for BTP staff. That is, the Samaritans dedicated BTP referral line that officers can use to refer vulnerable people to and the BTP national Suicide Prevention Hotline for use by rail staff to alert police to anyone at risk on the railway.

Summary

BTP have specific expertise around the complex issue of rail suicide. While we welcome potentially positive moves towards retaining specialist skills, we feel that it is entirely necessary to outline the life-saving impact of these specific expertise. BTP’s skills, policies and best practices in rail suicide prevention must be retained within their entirety within Police Scotland. Retaining and advancing these skills is important not only in reducing and preventing suicide on the rail network, but in getting rail running again and looking after staff following traumatic events. BTP reporting and data practices are also vital for both immediate threats to harm and wider suicide prevention work.

Samaritans Scotland
20 January 2017