Samaritans is supportive of the open letter sent to the Prime Minister from Sense About Science regarding the problem of delayed registration of deaths.

Samaritans’ main aim is that fewer people die by suicide. In order to achieve this aim, it is vital that Samaritans understand how many people from different demographics die by suicide. Having information in a timely manner is crucial so that we can design interventions and advertising pro-actively and appropriately. The rates (per 100,000) of suicide are important to Samaritans, so that we can understand which groups are most at risk and where we might need to focus our attention, like advertising campaigns in areas where people are at increased risk of suicide.

Any death that is suspected to be a suicide (as an ‘unnatural’ death), must be investigated by the coroner at an inquest. As the letter from Sense About Science states, inquests can take a long time to reach a decision about the cause of death (sometimes several years). The Office for National Statistics (ONS) acknowledges in their Suicide bulletin for deaths registered in 2012 (published in January 2014) that the average delay for registering of suicides in England and Wales is 155 days. In Scotland the average delay is just seven days.

The problem of registration delays is two-fold for Samaritans, firstly, the delay of suicide death registrations has obvious implications of slowing down the process of understanding how many and which groups are dying by suicide; but also since our suicide prevention efforts extend across the UK and Ireland, a further challenge in relation to comparability is exacerbated. The ONS notes the consequence of the difference in the time taken to register deaths; Scotland record proportionally more deaths as undetermined intent (included in the definition of suicide) than the rest of the UK, and year on year, the published statistics will refer to deaths occurring at different time periods (Scottish figures are more likely to closely represent deaths which occur in a year than the other countries).

Differences such as these between countries, might indicate that there are different patterns of suicide in the different nations, and therefore Samaritans should focus their attention differently in different places; or differences in trends over time and patterns of suicide may be a consequence of differing recording and registration process, and might lead to activities such as ours to be focused less appropriately and effectively.

Samaritans is therefore supportive of the letter from Sense About Science; we feel that an appropriate solution would be to uncouple the occurrence of deaths from registration of deaths in England and Wales, and introduce the procedure of issuing a probably cause of death, creating a more accurate picture of the incidence of suicide year on year.