

Staff support and wellbeing

Help through Crisis learning paper

October 2019

Delivered by



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About the Help through Crisis programme

Help through Crisis (HtC) is a £33 million National Lottery funded programme set up by the National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. HtC supports 69 partnerships across England which help people who are experiencing or at risk of hardship crisis to overcome the difficulties they are facing to plan for their futures. The partnerships receiving National Lottery funding through the HtC programme bring together small voluntary groups and established charities to work together locally. Working together, they offer people advice, advocacy and support which matches their personal circumstances. The aim is to look at the issues people face, and the underlying causes, from their basic needs, to their physical and mental health, to skills and employment. People are supported to draw on their personal experiences to build on their skills and strengths so they are ready to seize the opportunities and challenges ahead.

About the Learning, Evaluation and Support team

The HtC learning, evaluation and support (LSE) team is a consortium of organisations commissioned by the National Lottery Community Fund to help build understanding and capture learning from the HtC programme. The team is made up of people from Ipsos MORI (Lead Contractor), NEF Consulting, Revolving Doors Agency and Hopkins Van Mil. The role of the consortium is to help the 69 partnerships involved in the programme:

- Empowering them to evaluate and measure their impact, and capture learning about what works in tackling hardship crisis.
- Supporting their co-production activities, ensuring the people they support have a voice in shaping local services.
- Identifying good practice and disseminating learning to build the evidence base and help partnerships to replicate or scale up approaches from elsewhere.

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INTRODUCTION

Supporting the health and wellbeing of frontline staff is a common challenge faced by HtC partnerships and other crisis support organisations. Organisations need to equip and support staff to promote their wellbeing and ensure they do not face excessive stress or burnout. We have seen how HtC teams face increasing pressures due to the complexity of the issues experienced by people seeking help, combined with limited resources and increasing demand. As such, promoting staff wellbeing is essential to ensure that staff are fully supported to navigate their role and feel empowered to deliver high quality care.

This learning paper is based on:

- Case study visits with HtC partnerships earlier in the year – these highlighted the [importance of staff support](#), and some of the challenges partnerships face
- A [policy commentary](#) which built on a literature scan looking at the wider evidence, as well as findings from the case studies – this also included recommendations for funders and crisis support organisations
- Regional events with HtC partnerships in Spring 2019 which explored partnerships' experiences of providing staff support

This paper aims to share learning with HtC partnerships to encourage reflection on current approaches, and identify specific steps to improve staff support and wellbeing. The paper is divided into three sections, with questions for reflection throughout:

1. Providing appropriate staff support

2. Improving staff morale

3. What does this mean for partnerships?



Read the policy commentaries series [here](#)

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PROVIDING SUPPORT UNDER PRESSURE

HtC partnerships face challenges around staff wellbeing for two main reasons: they have **limited resources**, and there is **high demand** for the support they provide. These issues are reported by many HtC partnerships, reflecting wider pressures in crisis support organisations.

The level of demand for crisis support means frontline staff often have more to do than they can manage effectively in normal hours. Some staff **consistently work beyond their contracted hours** to support people in crisis – and this is a particular issue for those in part-time roles, which are common given the financial strain on organisations.

Staff also tend to have **strong personal investment** in their work and what they do to support people in crisis. This stems from a passion for their work and a sense of responsibility towards people, particularly when there is little support available from other organisations.

These pressures can put staff in a difficult position, and risks them having to balance **the needs of their clients against their own wellbeing**. In turn, this can make it difficult for staff to maintain a positive work-life balance. It can also lead to high stress levels and – in some cases – staff burnout.



We all have too much heart, people are too nice. We are our own worst enemy and there then is an expectation that we will always be there and always doing this much work."

London event participant



A massive referral list and high stress levels. Where is the time to give your family?"

Newcastle event participant



There genuinely is too much to do out there."

London event participant



How does your organisation think about staff wellbeing?

What barriers to supporting staff wellbeing has your organisation faced?

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP

Senior leaders and managers play a crucial role in promoting staff wellbeing. The onus is on leaders to develop a supportive culture within an organisation. This includes establishing a clear vision and commitment to promoting staff wellbeing, and reflecting this in organisational culture, communication, policies and practices.

Managers need to set the right tone and put wellbeing on the agenda by ensuring that staff have clear and adequate supervision and support. This requires an **understanding of the pressures frontline staff face and an openness to listen to their experiences**. This can help ensure the expectations on staff are realistic, and prevent individuals feeling overburdened with too much responsibility. Elements of clear and adequate supervision and support include: good line management, clinical supervision, and senior leaders dedicating time to listen to colleagues describe and reflect on their support needs.

One way for managers to develop an understanding of the pressures frontline staff face and the daily realities of their jobs is to spend extended time with those delivering frontline crisis support. This provides leaders and managers with frontline experience to inform future decisions. For example:

- In some local authorities, senior staff spend time in social care and education services to improve their understanding of delivery as they shape policy and practice
- Senior civil servants at the Department for Health spend one month a year in frontline NHS services



Looking someone in the eye and telling them how you really are always makes you feel better. We need to be given that opportunity.”

Birmingham event participant



I worry about raising issues as you don't want to be seen as not being capable.”

Birmingham event participant

Birmingham Rathbone uses a system of 360 degree supervision, where everyone checks in with each other on an ongoing basis. Without this, they do not think they would be able to achieve the productivity they do. Once a quarter, they have a team meeting to sit down and discuss progress on the project more formally.



What actions could senior leaders take to better understand and address the pressures experienced by frontline staff?

SETTING CLEAR BOUNDARIES

Partnerships across the HtC programme have grappled with how staff can set clear boundaries with the people they support, such as being clear around when and how support is provided. This theme was discussed at the last [National Event](#) and in the [Engaging Well learning paper](#). Having clear boundaries is crucial for staff to provide effective support for people over the long term while also taking care of their own wellbeing. To help establish this, partnerships described the importance of:

Within an organisation

Effective supervision – from the start

Having supervision in place as soon as new staff start helps to set clear expectations from their first day. It is important that managers dedicate time to support staff in establishing appropriate boundaries with the people they work with, and help staff avoid working patterns that might be unsustainable in the long term. This can help prevent stress, long working hours, and potential staff burnout.



Staff need to be clear about boundaries of the support they can offer, including a separation of their own life/ clients' life e.g. when [bumping into] a client on the road when [not at work]."

Leeds event participant

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With people seeking support

Making the support offer clear

Staff being clear and transparent about the parameters of the support they can provide from the beginning sets the right boundaries and tone for the relationship and helps manage expectations. This includes explaining why certain questions are being asked during the initial intake process, as well as providing clear information about the support offer.

Communicating clearly and effectively

Setting the right tone through friendly but professional communications can help staff develop rapport and set clear boundaries with service users. Staff can send people reminders about appointments and encourage them to keep in touch about how they are doing. Some partnerships have sent postcards or shared diaries as a way of keeping in touch. Maintaining professionalism is a key part of this. For example, being clear about using a work phone that is not switched on outside of office hours. This is important to set realistic expectations about availability.

EMBEDDING WELLBEING

Making sure management structures and processes reflect the importance of wellbeing is a good way to prioritise effective staff support. Some examples from HtC partnerships include:

- Having a standalone wellbeing steering group that flag issues to senior management
- Senior managers from outside the team meet with staff informally (e.g. over lunch or coffee) to check on their wellbeing
- Placing wellbeing issues as a standing item at team meetings

One programme that partnerships at the regional events recommended is the West Midlands Combined Authority's Thrive at Work programme. This programme provides toolkits and guidance for staff support, which include:

- Helping managers to talk about wellbeing issues more openly with staff
- Offering practical tools to improve staff wellbeing
- Helping foster culture change around staff wellbeing

Thrive at Work provides a comprehensive set of ideas. Its criteria and guidelines not only train employers on wellbeing in the workplace, but it also provides the tools to ensure employees can easily raise awareness and take action.

More information can be found at: <https://www.wmca.org.uk/what-we-do/thrive/thrive-at-work/>



How often does your organisation discuss staff wellbeing as a team?

What tools could your organisation use to make this more of a priority?

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IMPROVING STAFF MORALE

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STAFF MORALE IS OFTEN A CHALLENGE

Staff wellbeing can be affected by **limited opportunities for developing new skills** in a role, and by a **lack of career prospects** more generally. This is an issue across the crisis support sector, particularly in smaller organisations.

Partnerships also highlighted **low-pay as contributing to lower staff morale** – this can exacerbate problems linked to career progression. For example, pay may be fixed at the levels set in original grant applications, meaning that it does not increase for several years, even as staff become more experienced in their role.

A high level of staff turnover is therefore an issue in many partnerships, and **this has implications for staff wellbeing**. Experienced staff leaving can have an impact on team delivery and workload, as well as leading to problems associated with losing knowledge. In turn, this can affect team morale as staff work to cultivate trust and positive working relationships with new team members. Staff who see their colleagues leaving can also begin questioning their own job satisfaction and whether they, too, should seek other work and move on. The short term nature of funding for many crisis support projects can exacerbate this.



If you don't look after staff you are creating long-term problems including losing team members and overall strain."

London event participant



You spend a bit more now but you'll be saving money down the line."

Manchester event participant



The impact of staff turnover on staff morale is a complex issue. As discussed above, partnerships struggle with high staff turnover, which detrimentally impacts staff morale and wellbeing. **However, low turnover can also have similar negative impacts on staff wellbeing**. Some organisations have no turnover across years. This can limit opportunities for staff who seek career progression and create organisational stagnation by limiting the introduction and spread of new ideas, approaches and energy that often comes with new colleagues.

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Within your organisation, how has turnover affected staff wellbeing? How has your organisation addressed this?

DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND APPRECIATION CAN HELP

Partnerships describe the importance of **continuing to train and develop staff** as a way to improve their morale and wellbeing. This is especially important given that staff are increasingly dealing with situations which they may not have previously encountered, even if they have relevant experience.

One way to address this is through training that **supports staff to develop new skills** and promote their wellbeing. Not only does this make staff feel more confident in their role and improve the support they provide, it also supports ongoing professional development and potential career progression.

Developing an **appreciative work culture** can be a key part of improving morale. A lack of recognition for the daily pressure staff face can be demoralising. To counter this, senior leaders and managers can make efforts to recognise and celebrate small successes. Even simple things like 'saying thank you' and celebrating birthdays, can improve workplace wellbeing.

Co-producing services with staff is another way for leaders to show their appreciation and recognise the expertise and skills of staff, valuing their input. This involves increasing staff members' autonomy and involvement in decision-making.



What would an appreciative working culture look and feel like?



How could this be embedded within your organisation or partnership?



Our running joke is that we're only one step away from the clients in terms of how we deal with the stress due to the pressure experienced in combination with low pay and the financial issues some of us experience."

Leeds event participant

No Limits have monthly line management and clinical supervision as well as one to one support when needed. The organisation recognises that their staff are carrying increased risks in their work, but that limited funding means staff often cannot be paid more. Despite this, No Limits has kept morale high by offering good support and putting on team days. This, in turn, means that staff retention is good.

"The trouble is, as a voluntary organisation, we can't pay them anymore, even though their jobs have dramatically increased."

EMBEDDING STAFF WELLBEING AT THE START AND END OF PROJECTS

Spending the time required to support staff can be **particularly challenging at the start and end of projects**. This is often when teams are focused on establishing a project, or identifying funding to continue work. However, these are precisely the most important moments to consider these issues.

Creating a culture that prioritises and supports staff wellbeing at the **start of a project** is key to setting the right tone from the beginning. It can help for senior leadership to establish and communicate a clear vision that staff wellbeing is a priority throughout all project phases. Partnerships can ensure that staff have clear and adequate support, including through good line management, clinical supervision, and dedicated time with colleagues to share and reflect on their support needs. Staff need this time to connect and share experiences with their peers. It is also important that leaders are present for some of these conversations to understand what staff are going through.

These regular times for reflection and discussion are especially important towards the **end of a project**. The associated uncertainty about future funding and staff roles underscores the need for open conversations and steps to support staff wellbeing at a difficult time. An **ongoing focus** on staff morale and wellbeing will help ensure staff feel valued and continue to provide effective support at different stages of projects that are part of the HtC programme.



How might staff wellbeing needs vary throughout programme delivery? How could your organisation reflect this?



What could your organisation do to support staff wellbeing at all stages of the programme?



Sharing experiences helps

Partnerships said they found it helpful to share learning with others on staff wellbeing. Gathering ideas from other services facing similar challenges can help organisations find or develop better approaches.

“It’s really important to learn from and share with each other. Although we are different organisations we are talking about the same issues and trying to find solutions.”

3

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR PARTNERSHIPS?

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STAFF WELLBEING AND EFFECTIVE PROJECT DELIVERY ARE CLOSELY LINKED



Staff wellbeing is challenging in all organisations, and there are particular pressures for those providing crisis support. Evidence from partnerships shows that prioritising a supportive organisational culture does more than just improve staff wellbeing. It also leads to higher quality and more effective support for people facing crisis. In this way, a crucial aspect of effective project delivery entails creating a supportive culture.

This includes building in time at the partnership level for staff across organisations to convene and share their insights, experiences and reflections. The empathy, solidarity and support staff feel for their peers across the partnership (and across the HtC programme) is beneficial to staff wellbeing. This in turn can improve project delivery.

Final reflection questions

- Q How is staff wellbeing reflected in organisational policies, practices and procedures?**
- Q What are the top three organisational challenges to better supporting staff wellbeing?**
- Q How could your HtC partnership support and embed staff wellbeing across partner organisations?**
- Q What actions is your organisation going to take to support staff wellbeing? What could you do as a member of the team?**

If you have any comments or questions about any of the issues discussed in this paper, please get in touch with the Learning, Support and Evaluation team using the email address below, or via the Slack platform.



helpthroughcrisis@ipsos.com

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