Help through Crisis
Supporting staff wellbeing

Learning, Support & Evaluation webinar Summary report

About the Help through Crisis programme

Help through Crisis 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. It 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, Support & Evaluation webinars

In April 2020, the Learning, Support and Evaluation (LSE) team interviewed HtC partnerships to understand how we can help you during the Covid-19 crisis. These conversations highlighted several specific areas you would like further support with as you adapt to a very different context. Partnerships said that *supporting staff wellbeing* during the pandemic was an important issue, and this was the focus for our first webinar.

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1. Purpose of the Supporting Staff wellbeing webinar

HtC staff wellebing webinars took place on 1 and 2 July 2020. Each session lasted an hour, and started with a 20 minute presentation by Daniel Cameron from the LSE team. He shared learning from a range of sources, also highlighted in the recent factsheet on supporting staff wellbeing during lockdown. The presentation was followed by a facilitated discussion giving partnerships an opportunity to reflect on successes and challenges during the pandemic and how they might better support staff wellbeing in future.

This summary highlights key themes, ideas and solutions for supporting staff wellbeing that emerged from the two discussions.

2. Key themes

2.1 Dealing with anxiety as lockdown eases

'There is always more you can be doing to help those in need, but you've got to be aware of staff anxiety or we won't be able to help anyone.'
Lead partner staff

Webinar participants say staff and volunteers coped extremely well in the initial stages of lockdown. They were galvanised by the crisis and understood a concerted effort was needed to continue to support clients effectively. This meant that there was a sense of 'getting on with it' in the early days and weeks. Teams came together to find strategies and solutions for remote working and support, often setting aside personal concerns.

This approach has been successful in allowing partnerships to continue delivering their projects, but is now thought to be having an increasing impact on staff anxiety levels. In general, partnerships have been able to meet the practical needs staff have – for example making sure they have the IT equipment, stationery and phones to do their work. What is lacking is an effective way of assessing and supporting wellbeing remotely.

There is shared concern that anxiety levels have been gradually increasing as staff continue to work remotely from home using video conferencing and phone calls to interact with clients and colleagues; or, in a small number of cases, working with very limited and socially distanced interactions from the office. Managers feel that staff have recently had more time to reflect on the shock of what has happened and the challenges of working remotely. Staff are missing daily face-to-face support from colleagues and direct contact with beneficiaries to help them through.

A related concern is how to support staff with their wellbeing when they have experienced very different situations during the pandemic. Staff may have been self-isolating at different periods, been furloughed, worked in the office, or only worked at home. As lockdown eases and teams are coming back together, it is becoming clear to managers that the different situations that staff have experienced during lockdown will need to be addressed with care and sensitivity. This includes any tensions within teams related to these varied circumstances.

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2.2 Coping with a new work life balance from home

'It's a pressure cooker. She was trying to juggle a young child, home schooling, fear that her daughter might overhear a difficult conversation with a client, working late at night. Something is going to go pop.'
Lead partner staff

There have been more immediate and ongoing negative impacts on wellbeing for some staff linked to their home situations. Examples include a lack of childcare meaning one staff member had to ask her ex-partner to take their child during the week so that she could work without affecting her child's wellbeing. Others are concerned about staff having to work late at night to cope with family responsibilities during the day.

Managers say that, before the pandemic, an email late at night from a staff member would be an early warning that their workload was too great, or they were not managing their time effectively. Now that additional juggling of work with caring and other responsibilities has become normalised, managers face challenges in assessing and supporting wellbeing, particularly when contact with staff is online or over the phone.

Isolation is a key factor too. Some staff members live alone, and work is an important part of their social life. Working without face-to-face contact with others has had a negative impact on their wellbeing.

2.3 Not doing enough?

'When do you draw the line? Who wants to be the person who says 'no'?'
Lead partner staff

Partnership staff feel they have demostrated high levels of dedication to their work, their clients and their projects in responding to the pandemic. However, the absence of face-to-face time with clients is seen as changing staff perceptions about the effectiveness of the support they can offer beneficiaries. They feel staff are worrying even more about not doing enough.

One partnership was asked to support an existing beneficiary in hospital. She had just given birth to a child, not having known that she was pregnant. For staff, saying that they could not help felt entirely unacceptable, so they took what steps they could to support her under challenging circumstances. Partnership staff provided face-to-face support at the weekend, outside of usual working hours, while abiding by social distancing measures. These additional pressures had a negative impact on the team's wellbeing. It made them anxious about the support they could provide when unable to come closer than two metres. They also felt overwhelmed by working out of normal hours in an already very busy working week. Even so, the staff still worry that they did not support the woman as effectively as they would have been able to before the pandemic.

This sense of not being able to do enough is not new for partnership staff, but not being able to offer direct face-to-face support heightens their concerns. Webinar participants say they feel 'guilty' or 'frustrated' that they are not doing enough, or cannot do enough remotely, to support their clients. One manager described a staff member who felt she should not receive all her salary, and that she was somehow 'not worthy' because, without direct face-to-face contact with clients she felt she was not doing all that she used to do to support them. Working from home is seen as exacerbating this sense of worry because staff have no commute to process their experiences during the day before getting home. Similarly, some participants describe missing quick end of day reflections and discussions with their team or manager that helped them resolve challenges. These factors make it harder to stop thinking about work at the end of the day, which is seen as increasingly detrimental to wellbeing.

3. Wellbeing solutions and ideas

In sharing their approaches to supporting staff wellbeing, webinar participants emphasise that working with clients and liaising with colleagues with Covid-19 restrictions in place is new for everyone. Partnerships are testing new approaches to communicating with others and providing support, and seeing how they work. Webinar participants recognise that the impact of lockdown has been different for different staff, but also argue that all HtC staff and volunteers have experienced some level of trauma during this period.

3.1. Communicating openly

Open and transparent communications are seen as essential for supporting wellbeing in this new and challenging situation. Managers highlight the importance of making themselves available for informal meetings and, often more importantly, for informal conversations. Many webinar participants said being available informally is often more useful to staff, and that having in place formal policies and procedures is important, but not enough on its own.

Managers also stress that some of the steps they have taken to support wellbeing felt like relatively small gestures to them, but had a significant and positive impact on staff. Ideas include:

- Sending a chocolate or a motivational card in a delivery of essential work supplies to a team member, saying thank you for doing a great job at every opportunity.

- Prioritising time for informal 'check-in' chats throughout the day, making sure this is a two-way exchange to provide reassurance that lots of people are experiencing anxiety at different times in different ways.

- Helping staff to recognise that there are limits to what they can do to support people and offering encouragement that they are doing the best they can in difficult circumstances.

- Making it clear that they have noticed that things are challenging for staff as a team and individually and discussing how to offer specific support.

3.2 Taking a personalised approach

Participants are clear there is no standard approach to supporting staff wellbeing that will work for everyone during this crisis. They described a range of individual challenges to wellbeing – from staff coping with mild anxiety, to those who have had panic attacks and other mental health issues. Offering effective support with wellbeing requires a personalised approach. Participants suggested using a range of measures from formal supervision and risk assessments to the more informal chats discussed previously.

3.3 Making the best use of technology

Webinar participants recognise the value of technology in supporting staff and connecting them to their colleagues and the people they support. Some say they had consulted with staff to identify new solutions and ways of working, others built on platforms they were already using such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Many of the projects have used some or all of the following tools and ideas:

- Providing or paying for the right equipment, including headphones and boosts to WiFi to support people to work from home.

- Having separate WhatsApp groups – one for more formal work conversations during office hours, and another one for social chat.

- A daily team check-in for people to share how they are at the beginning of the working day.

- Zoom or Microsoft Teams staff meetings with dedicated time to discuss wellbeing.

- Zoom or Microsoft Teams staff socials – where work is not discussed.

- Virtual lunch and tea breaks.

3.4 Maintaining clear work boundaries

Managers emphasised the importance of leading by example, such as making sure they turn off their work phones at the end of the day. They also discuss the value in being clear about where the boundaries are between work and people's personal lives, and the potential impact on wellbeing boundaries are not taken seriously.

Ensuring that annual leave is taken – in some cases insisting on this formally – is also seen as important. Participants highlight the value of a week or two away from work for re-charging batteries, putting work challenges into perspective in relation to the rest of their lives, and coming back better able to support beneficiaries. Explaining the importance of time away from work to staff is also seen as important for boosting morale and reassuring staff that their wellbeing is being prioritised.

3.5 Creating certainty where possible

Some webinar participants describe the value of bringing as much certainty as possible to staff in the midst of wider uncertainty – both day to day and in planning for the future. They emphasise that this is not about pretending to have all the answers, but being clear about what was known or being planned for in the short and medium-term. This includes strategies for managing ongoing remote working and bringing staff back into the office when appropriate, safe and in line with government guidance. Some of their ideas include:

- Maintaining regular routines – for example, it can be helpful to know that because it is Tuesday at 10am you will be joining a team meeting.

- A socially distanced gathering in a garden or park to spend time together, reminding staff that their team is there to offer support.

- Planning together and consulting effectively on how to return safely to the physical workspace.

- Having a rota on who will come back to the office and when, and sticking to it.

- Planning together and consulting on how to engage service users in the provision of support.

A number of projects during lockdown had new staff beginning to work on HtC. They needed to provide an induction process with new team members who had not met their co-workers in person. Some participants saw this as an opportunity to motivate the whole team in providing the new member of staff with the tools, support and information they need to effectively do their job. Having a shared sense of purpose is considered helpful in improving staff wellbeing.

In these uncertain times webinar participants are clear that supporting staff wellbeing should be a key priority for all HtC managers and teams. They stress how essential it is to take care of yourself and your colleagues in order to continue to deliver support to people effectively.

For more information

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