

ADAPTING WAYS OF WORKING IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

Help through Crisis learning paper

September 2020

Delivered by



Ipsos MORI



Creating Connections
Hopkins Van Mil

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 local small voluntary groups and established charities. 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 and Evaluation team

The HtC, Learning, Support and Evaluation (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), Revolving Doors Agency and Hopkins Van Mil. The role of the consortium is to work with the 69 partnerships involved in the programme to:

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

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INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in many changes for HtC partnerships. In the weeks after lockdown began, partnerships had to rapidly redesign how they support people in crisis. Partnerships have sought to maintain a person-centred approach, responding to individual needs flexibly as they deliver services in the context of social distancing and wider lockdown restrictions.

Partnerships have continued to deliver effective support to people in crisis, despite the significant challenges associated with the pandemic. This learning paper describes how HtC partnerships have adapted their ways of working over recent months.

The learning paper focuses on two key themes:

- 1. Maintaining person-centred approaches during Covid-19**
- 2. Reaching people in new ways during Covid-19**

This learning paper draws on insights from interviews with staff leading HtC partnerships, conducted between 3rd July and 14th August 2020. We have also built on other resources and included links to further reading where relevant.

I'm taking more of a tailored, individual approach."
Lead partner staff

Now we have had to work in a different way we know that we can. There is a lot of confidence in how we will be able to deliver things going forward because it has worked."
Lead partner staff

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MAINTAINING PERSON-CENTRED APPROACHES DURING COVID-19

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PARTNERSHIPS HAVE FOCUSED MORE ON IMMEDIATE NEEDS

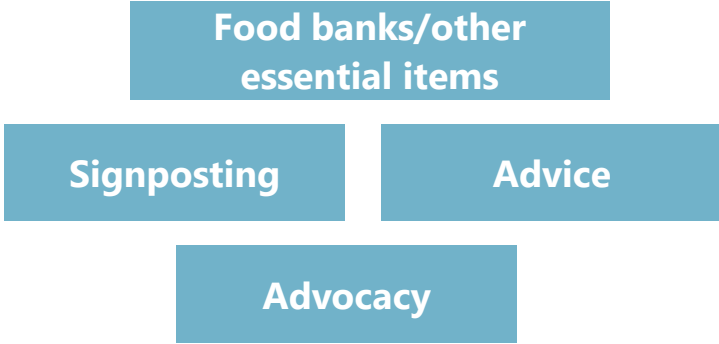
During the Covid-19 pandemic, partnerships have helped people facing crisis access food and essential items, signposted people to other services, and provided advice and advocacy. While the context has changed significantly, these broad types of support mirror the four most common services HtC partnerships said they offered in 2018. What has changed is that partnerships have increased their focus on meeting the immediate needs of people in crisis.

This reflects partnerships' involvement in the emergency response to the pandemic in local areas, where they have helped to address problems associated with people not being able to access food and other basic essentials. Partnerships have often had to focus particular attention on people who are unable to leave their homes due to shielding measures, as well as people who have experienced financial difficulties as a result of the changes in their work and personal circumstances.



Meeting immediate needs

Many partnerships have been providing food and supermarket vouchers, sharing information on local food banks and baby banks and making use of hardship funds to provide financial support. Foodbanks involved in the programme have seen an increase in demand for their services and have adapted ways of working, often shifting from distributing food from central locations to delivering food directly to people, particularly where someone is unable to leave their home.



The four most common services provided by HtC partnerships before the pandemic

Source: 2018 National Event Survey



[Food vouchers] have been particularly important, as the local food banks are often only open once a week. So, if a client seeks support on Tuesday and the foodbank is only open on Monday, they will have to wait a full week to access supplies. The hardship fund allows us to send a voucher for a local supermarket instead."

Lead partner staff

PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT REMAINS IMPORTANT

The pandemic has required partnerships to change their delivery models in a short timeframe to respond to Covid-19 restrictions. Despite the challenges associated with adapting how they work, partnerships continue to recognise the importance of offering person-centred approaches as they support people facing crisis.

1. Being flexible when offering remote support

Partnerships have found that different ways of staying in contact suit different people, often in unexpected ways. For example, one partnership had expected the young people they work with to want to use Zoom, since younger people tend to be more confident with new technology. However, they found that the young people they worked with were reluctant to use Zoom and preferred to use mobile messaging. Asking people what technology they would like to use and avoiding making assumptions about their preferences can help build relationships and find a suitable approach.


2. Providing help to get online

Partnerships described how people they work with were often very uncomfortable using video calls at the beginning of pandemic. As a result, some partnerships have delivered one to one and group support to help people access and use different online platforms. Offering tailored support can help overcome concerns about using new technologies, builds rapport and helps address practical barriers people may face. The [effectively engaging with people online factsheet](#) provides further suggestions for supporting people online.

3. Embracing the benefits of online working


Although there are challenges, partnerships have identified benefits to providing crisis support remotely, both for staff and people using services. Benefits for staff and organisations include cutting costs, reducing travel time, learning new skills, and greater flexibility around how and when staff work. For people using services, virtual methods can be more convenient, as they can reduce travel time, particularly in remote locations or where a partnership covers a large geographical area. Some partnerships have seen a reduction in missed appointments because people find it easier to engage with services over the phone and online.

Many partnerships have taken a blended approach, providing support both online and offline as appropriate. The following pages include some of the ways partnerships are now providing support.




It is important to be open to new ways of working and being flexible."

Lead partner staff



Now we have had to work in a different way we know that we can. There is a lot of confidence in how we will be able to deliver things because it has worked."

Lead partner staff



We will be providing face to face support where we can, with digital support being the go-to."

Lead partner staff

DIFFERENT WAYS TO PROVIDE CRISIS SUPPORT REMOTELY



Virtual meetings

Video conferencing platforms provide a way of seeing people while speaking to them online. This can be a valuable way of picking up on subtle cues in body language or identifying problems that may be visible on screen but not obvious through a phone call or written messages. It can also help people accessing services to see their case worker, providing some continuity in support even if people are unable to meet face to face.

In addition to one to one support, virtual meetings allow partnerships to host group sessions. For example, Oxford Citizens Advice's Influencing Group has continued to meet every fortnight over Zoom. During lockdown, members of this group were also encouraged to call each other, to provide peer-support and reduce isolation. This has provided a way of maintaining contact between the group despite not being able to meet face to face.



Messaging services

Some people may prefer to speak to an advice worker over email, or text or chat messaging services like WhatsApp. These services have been an important way for HtC partnerships to keep in touch with the people they support throughout the Covid-19 pandemic.

As written messages can be sent and responded to when it is convenient, this can be an effective way of providing support and advice to people who sometimes struggle to commit to appointments.

The Cambridge Crisis Network has seen a number of people get in touch with their services via email, and they have moved to using email to provide support to those who prefer to be contacted in this way.



Online resources

Before Covid-19, people who needed support often accessed information through leaflets in advice centres or other locations. With many of these places closed, partnerships have been exploring new ways of signposting people to further support.

One approach is to provide information, advice, contact details and links to other services online. For example, North West Kent Citizen's Advice has uploaded details of its services on its website. The website also provides a suite of resources for those looking for support. This means people can self refer to services and receive support online.

While this will not work for everyone, putting resources online can help save time as people can access the information they need directly at a time convenient for them.



Part of the challenge is getting the public to understand there is a fantastic free resource which can give up to date verified and quality advice about the situations people find themselves in."

Lead partner staff

ONLINE SERVICES CAN BE BLENDED WITH OFFLINE SUPPORT



Support via the post

Prior to the pandemic, support sessions often involved advice workers going through someone's paperwork with them to understand their situation and identify what to do next. These sessions might also have involved completing forms together.

Without the ability to meet in person, partnership staff have been exploring how to share paperwork so advice workers can see the information they need to support someone (e.g. their correspondence or bills) so that individuals can take steps to get the support they need.

Partnerships are using the post to send paperwork to people they support who have appropriate literacy skills. This includes sharing printed resources, vouchers or contact details. Staff can include a stamped and addressed envelope so people can return paperwork to a partnership office for free, allowing their support worker to collect and review it. Although this is slower than meeting in person, it has proved an effective way of sharing information with those unable or unwilling to share documents online.



Working through partners

Many organisations involved in HtC partnerships were required to close their offices and advice centres at the beginning of the pandemic. As the lockdown restrictions ease, other services are beginning to reopen while respecting social distancing guidelines.

Reflecting this, some HtC lead partners have worked with their partner organisations to provide opportunities for people to access face to face support. This has involved signposting individuals to new and existing partners and referring people directly so that people can get the support they need. For example, Lancashire Citizen Advice's partner organisation reopened their emergency drop-in services with social distancing and sanitation measures in place. This has allowed staff at Lancashire Citizens Advice to signpost people needing immediate face to face support to the emergency drop-in service offered by their partner, even though the Citizens Advice offices remain closed.



Socially distanced face to face support

As restrictions ease, partnerships have started meeting people face to face, observing social distancing or wearing PPE to reduce the risk to staff and people accessing services.

Following the easing of lockdown, some of the young people supported by Wyre Forest Nightstop suggested going on socially distanced walks in local parks. In response, the partnership started leading nature walks with young people. Wyre Forest Nightstop aim to build on this and introduce a walking group for young women to reduce social isolation and provide peer-support. This is an innovation the partnership team do not think would have happened if they had continued working in their community hub.

Even though we offered to digitally include clients and support them with that, that wasn't really possible. They said we'd rather wait till we can meet you face-to-face."

Lead partner staff

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING WITH BENEFICIARIES

Partnerships recognise the importance of continuing to take person-centred approaches, building on their learning about effective crisis support throughout the HtC programme. However, partnerships have faced challenges working with beneficiaries to shape service delivery because of Covid-19 restrictions. The successes and challenges partnerships have experienced with involving service users during the pandemic were discussed in the [remote co-production webinar](#).

Involving those who use services will be important as the pandemic continues. This will help partnerships understand the impact on people's lives and develop more effective person-centred approaches together with those they are working to support.

Some partnerships are already running online group sessions with beneficiaries to gather feedback and shape service delivery. Others are involving people more informally by asking for feedback during phone or video calls, posting feedback forms directly to people, or developing surveys which can be completed online, over the phone or via post.



So just being agile, adaptive, finding out what service users want, also establishing what funding streams are available [is our approach]."

Lead partner staff

Developing a telephone befriending service – MindOut

MindOut is a Brighton based charity who lead the LGBTQ Urgent Need Advocacy Service partnership. Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, MindOut staff have noticed an increase in the number and severity of mental health problems among the people they support. People were becoming increasingly isolated and needed help in addition to the advocacy services the partnership provides.

MindOut consulted service users about how they could be best supported remotely during the pandemic. They found that a lot of people did not want to use Zoom due to concerns over accessibility and privacy but they felt more comfortable speaking over the phone. As a result, the organisation applied for additional funding to set up a befriending service over the telephone. This was a direct result of requests from people using services and their experiences during lockdown.

Reflection questions

- What challenges have you faced involving beneficiaries during the pandemic?
- What formal and informal ways of capturing feedback can you introduce?
- How else can you work with beneficiaries to ensure services meet their needs?

The [working with beneficiaries learning paper](#) and [effectively engaging with people online factsheet](#) include more ideas and resources to help partnerships think about how to involve service users.

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REACHING PEOPLE IN NEW WAYS DURING COVID-19

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REACHING PEOPLE USING ONLINE AND OFFLINE APPROACHES

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed how HtC partnerships reach people facing crisis. Previously, many partnerships relied on well-established referral pathways and drop-in sessions or advice centres that people could attend in person if they were looking for support. The closure of these physical spaces has made it more difficult to identify individuals in need.

Some partnerships are concerned that people are facing crisis situations without support because people do not know where to go for help, or are unable to leave their home because of Covid-19 restrictions. Similarly, some partnerships have seen a reduction in the number of people being referred to their services as a result of the closure of drop-in advice sessions. Staff worry about not reaching everyone who needs support.

In response, HtC partnerships have explored new ways of reaching out to people using both online and offline approaches:

Raising awareness of services

- Through social media
- Sharing information on local websites or in newsletters
- Placing information, contact details or leaflets in services with physical spaces that are still open

Developing new referral pathways

- Connecting with new partners
- Encouraging self-referrals in new ways

We have a good social media following and are well linked in to other agencies, so we could encourage people to self-refer. Our only hesitation is that experience tells us that you have to encourage people to engage.”

Lead partner staff

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PLACING INFORMATION WHERE PEOPLE ARE LIKELY TO SEE IT

HtC partnerships described the importance of putting information where people are likely to see it. For example, young people may be more likely to be active on social media and see information shared there. As such, it may be useful for an organisation supporting young people to advertise in this way, in contrast to organisations focused on supporting older people or those who are digitally excluded. HtC partnerships need to consider who are the key groups they are trying to reach, before identifying appropriate places for sharing information about services.

GP practices

The Cambridge Crisis Network previously held drop-in sessions in GP practices in rural areas. This enabled people living locally to access support without having to travel into central Cambridge, which some found difficult or too expensive. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the drop-in sessions had to stop as access to GP practices became restricted. Staff were worried about missing people who would normally attend these sessions and might not otherwise know how to access support.

In response, the partnership put up posters in the local GP surgeries where they would normally be based. This has led to an increase in people getting in touch directly with the network. The partnership is now exploring opportunities to work directly with people using services to increase their outreach work through word of mouth.

At the moment we're not allowed in GPs' surgeries. All the outreach activities have stopped or been suspended. We made lots of posters to put in the surgeries with information on, tips and advice, and how to get in contact with us directly."

Lead partner staff

Foodbanks

Mid-Norfolk Citizens Advice saw an initial reduction in demand at the beginning of the crisis as people were no longer able to attend their drop-in centre. They decided to advertise their services in local foodbanks as well as contacting a wide range of local organisations – including the local council – so information about the support available could be included in newsletters.

I've taken posters and flyers to all the food banks. The food bank is one of the places people will go. If they have no phone credit, they may go to the food bank. We are trying to mitigate the fact we may not get to the very vulnerable people without phone credit."

Lead partner staff

DEVELOPING NEW PARTNERSHIPS

Many partnerships have built up strong relationships with local organisations and statutory services over several years. These had often become reliable referral pathways. However, Covid-19 has affected how organisations work together. Partnerships have found that some of the organisations they work with have experienced changing levels of demand, while others have made staff changes, including putting people on the furlough scheme or making redundancies. As a result, some organisations have become less responsive or reduced the number of referrals they make, and this has happened both within HtC partnerships and across the wider crisis support network in local areas.

Some partnerships have recognised a need for new relationships with organisations with the specialist knowledge or skills to meet specific support needs. For example, partnerships have identified a need for more mental health support as a result of the pandemic, and have been exploring opportunities to work with different providers. In this way, the Covid-19 pandemic has changed the organisations HtC partnerships work with, so that they can reach and support people with different needs.

Wyre Forest Nightstop is the lead partner for the Axis Youth Hub, which provides services to young people at risk of homelessness. The Hub was forced to close their drop-in centre at the beginning of the pandemic and rely on other methods of outreach to identify people in the community who need support.

Not being able to have chance encounters at face to face partnership meetings and local conferences means they have made a more conscious effort to publicise their services in the crisis support sector locally. For example, staff have taken steps such as getting back in contact with organisations they had worked with in the past, using social media to reach out to young people, and contacting local agencies to check they are aware of their service and understand how to make referrals. This has also acted as a way of making local providers aware that, although the Axis Youth Hub is closed, the partnership is still able to offer support to young people in need.

We are focusing on how we change our referral pathways to adapt to this new way of people coming together.”
Lead partner staff

Not being able to bump into people at conferences or workshops, certainly on my part, has made me more conscious about contacting other agencies and making sure they are more aware that the project is out there and delivering services.”
Lead partner staff

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REVIEWING AND ADAPTING OUTREACH APPROACHES

The [reaching out](#) learning paper describes how HtC partnerships were conducting outreach activities and referrals before the Covid-19 pandemic. These suggestions are worth revisiting given the changed context.

Building understanding

- Considering who is being supported and comparing this with the local needs of people who used services before the pandemic.
- Thinking about who is “easy to ignore” and identifying ways of reaching them, including working to remove barriers that prevent them from accessing support. People who may have not faced barriers before may now be facing barriers as a result of the pandemic. For example, people who are not online, those who are shielding, or people who are socially isolated may find it harder to access services.



Reflection questions

- Who might be missing out on support during the pandemic?
- How can these people be reached either online or offline?

Increasing visibility

- Taking steps to build reputation with people who might need services, telling people about how they can access support if offices are closed, and raising awareness of what local services are available in an area.



- Where are people facing crisis currently likely to see information?
- How else might you raise awareness of your services?

Working with others

- Collaborating with partners and volunteers to reach people who need support and help them to access appropriate services. For example, other organisations may provide face to face support in the community.



- What organisations do you need to develop new partnerships with?

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WHERE TO GO FOR FURTHER RESOURCES

A variety of additional complementary resources are available on the [HtC Google Drive](#).

Supporting and involving people

- The [digital inclusion factsheet](#) contains links and resources for supporting people to get online.
- The [effectively engaging with people online factsheet](#) contains links and resources for setting up online activities and building rapport online.
- This [adapting in adversity report](#) explores how organisations have addressed multiple disadvantage with technology during Covid-19.
- The [working with beneficiaries](#) learning paper explores how partnerships involved services users before the pandemic.

Reaching out to people and working with others

- The [reaching out](#) learning paper includes suggestions for how to improve outreach and referrals.
- The [partnership working](#) learning paper contains ideas and learning related to working in partnerships.

Delivering during Covid-19

- The preparing and planning learning paper shares approaches for thinking about the future and planning for different scenarios that may result from the Covid-19 pandemic.
- This [adapting in adversity report](#) includes insights into how organisations have delivered services to people experiencing multiple disadvantage during Covid-19.

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THANK YOU!

We'd like to thank all the HtC partnerships who have contributed examples to this paper:

Cambridge Crisis Network

Mid-Norfolk Citizens Advice

Birmingham Rathbone

Wyre Forest Nightstop

MindOUT

Access Dorset

Lancashire Citizens Advice

North East Law Centre

Oxford Citizens Advice

Citizens Advice in North West Kent

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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.



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