

EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP WORKING DURING HELP THROUGH CRISIS (AND BEYOND)

Learning paper

May 2021

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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 (TNLCF), 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 importance and benefits of effective partnership working have been highlighted throughout the HtC programme. How partnerships work together is a critical part of successful delivery: ensuring beneficiaries receive effective crisis support requires all organisations involved to work collaboratively.

The Covid-19 pandemic has posed significant challenges for partnerships and the people they support. Many of these challenges have been overcome through working collaboratively to adapt services. This has included connecting with organisations locally, for example as part of local community responses.

This learning paper considers what has been learnt over the course of the HtC programme about effective partnership working. It brings together previous findings (from learning papers on [Partnership working](#) and [Working with partners during Covid-19](#)) alongside new findings from recent case studies conducted by the LSE team. The LSE team have carried out 22 interviews with 7 partnerships to date in 2021.*

The paper is structured as follows:

Section 1: Principles of effective partnership working – this section briefly recaps previously identified ‘key ingredients’ to partnership working. It also considers some additional practical considerations that partnerships identify as crucial to establishing effective partnership working processes. The findings draw on case studies illustrating how HtC partnerships have demonstrated effective partnership working in practice throughout their HtC project.

Section 2: Ongoing benefits of partnership working and overcoming challenges – this section reflects the main benefits of partnership working to organisations and their beneficiaries, and considers how challenges can be overcome. It then considers effective partnerships as a legacy of the HtC programme, and how the strength of the relationships established could continue to bring additional benefits to partners and wider communities.



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As ever, if you have anything in particular you would like support with, please feel free to contact us at: HelpThroughCrisis@ipsos-mori.com

*At the time of writing. Case study fieldwork is ongoing

1

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP WORKING

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HTC PROJECTS INVOLVE A RANGE OF DIFFERENT PARTNERS

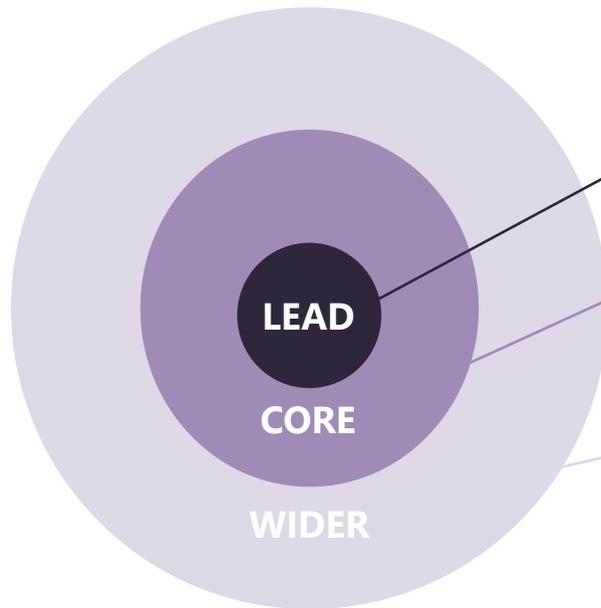
Partnership working is a key element of the HtC programme. In order to apply for HtC funding, all partnerships had to demonstrate how they would work with others to provide person-centred crisis support. Underpinning the programme is a commitment to involving smaller scale grassroots community organisations that reach out to those who may not easily engage with mainstream services, and to demonstrate effective collaborative working.

There are three broad types of relationships involved in HtC partnerships:

Lead Partner: Lead partners are the grant holders for HtC partnerships. They have overall responsibility for project delivery and reporting back to TNLCF.

Core Partner: Core partners are funded through the HtC programme. They have a key or strategic role in delivery. They would usually report directly to the lead partner and are likely to have little or no engagement with TNLCF.

Wider Partner: Wider (or 'extended') partners have no direct financial relationship with HtC projects. Their involvement may be informal or formal, and they may have very different levels of knowledge about the HtC programme.



Types of partners involved in HtC projects:

Local authorities

Housing orgs

Foodbanks

Faith orgs

Health providers

Law Centres

JobCentre Plus

Private landlords

THREE 'INGREDIENTS' UNDERPIN SUCCESSFUL PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

There is no single approach to effective partnership working, but our previous learning paper identified three overarching 'key ingredients' to partnership working (with core and wider partners) which partnerships described as integral to success:

1. Co-operation

- Co-operation requires willingness from each organisation to **work together collaboratively**. This can help to build trust between partners and avoid having power dynamics skewed towards one partner. This helps ensure that decision making is effectively shared.
- Co-operation is not about each partner doing the same thing as each organisation will have its individual strengths. Working collaboratively and cooperatively can help to **identify these strengths**, decide on clear roles and avoid duplicating work across partners.

Shared decision-making and mutual cooperation are key to effective co-operation

2. Communication

- Communication among partners is a vital aspect of effective partnership working. Regular communication (formal and informal) between partners helps to ensure that everyone is **aware of the roles and responsibilities** of each organisation and that referrals between organisations are smooth.
- Each partnership communicates differently (and this may have changed during Covid-19), however it is important that meetings between partnerships have a **clear purpose with an agreed agenda** for discussion.

Creating a time and space to be open and honest with partners (formally and informally) can strengthen partnerships

3. Flexibility

- A flexible approach to partnership working recognises the value of collaboration and **incorporates different ways of working** among partnerships.
- Being able to work flexibly is vital in **overcoming challenges**. Partnerships have faced many obstacles throughout the HtC programme, and Covid-19 has meant partnerships have needed to be particularly flexible in how they work.
- Having flexibility also ensures that services **adapt to the needs of beneficiaries** and maintain a person-centred approach.

The ability to change an approach to cater for different partners can greatly strengthen partnership working

HTC PARTNERSHIPS DESCRIBED FOUR FOUNDATIONAL FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Partnerships identified a number of factors they considered to be important for ensuring that partnerships work effectively in practice, starting at inception. These have been grouped into four **'foundations'** which form the basis of effective partnership working.

Agreeing a shared vision

Working towards a collective goal by agreeing on a set of values and intended outcomes

Establishing effective governance

Having arrangements for decision making, accountability and the behaviour of the organisations involved

Setting up information sharing mechanisms and protocols

Agreeing how you will share and process beneficiary data, and share wider knowledge relevant to other partners

Having the right mix of partners involved

Strengthening your partnership by having a (complementary) mix of expertise

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FOUNDATION 1: AGREEING A SHARED VISION

- Agreeing a **shared vision** at the start of the partnership can make it easier for partners from different organisations to navigate challenges they may face together.
- Some HtC partnerships described how they discussed and agreed **values** as a partnership, and how these values informed how they worked together. Examples of values cited by partnerships included openness, honesty and integrity. Partnerships have, in some cases, also **agreed on a set of intended outcomes** to help steer them towards a collective goal.
- It can be helpful to **acknowledge that challenges and frictions may emerge**, but that a shared vision and agreed values will provide a framework for the partnership to navigate these successfully.
- At the beginning of the partnership, it can be helpful to meet more frequently and discuss any emerging issues. This can **build trust** among partners. For example, at the outset of their project, Oasis Community Housing held monthly partnership meetings which helped to establish the key strengths of each organisation. Meeting regularly early on can also establish a relationship where partners are not afraid to challenge each other where this may be necessary.

Those relationships that were built early on are still there, they are still quite enduring currently."

Core partner staff



Case study – KeyRing Ancora project



KeyRing works formally with Christian's Against Poverty (CAP) and Oldham Food Bank to deliver the **Ancora project**. The project provides immediate and ongoing support to people in Oldham. The project also has a significant wider network in the Oldham area.

At the outset of their partnership, core partners **met regularly to brainstorm ideas** and set out what their shared values would be. The partners agreed what their key objectives were, making an effort to take the needs of all partners into account. They also focused on coming up with solutions to overcome any barriers to working together.

These early brainstorming discussions meant partners provided a 'sounding board' for each other. As the project progressed, they also discussed what was working and what was not working. Creating this partnership dynamic at the outset was seen to have encouraged an open culture, including among newer staff who joined the project. For example, the KeyRing project said different partners are **open to challenging each other** to come up with the way to best promote the interests of the beneficiary (and sharing the methods with which to achieve this outcome).

FOUNDATION 2: EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE

- Clear governance arrangements in partnerships help provide appropriate **structure** for key processes like **decision making, accountability** and the **behaviour** of the organisations involved. Having this kind of structure in place does not mean that every aspect of the partnership is fixed from the outset. Instead, these processes can be adapted to improve ways of working between partners as the partnership evolves.
- Effective governance arrangements are one of the core pillars of a strong partnership, and this does not need to be limited to how the partnership is managed overall. Through good governance practices, managers can provide a **shared framework for frontline staff** to use in their work. For example, a governance model that clearly articulates key **ethical principles** or sets out a **code of conduct** for all staff and volunteers can help shape a partnership's culture.

Case study – Brentwood Middleton Day Centre



Brentwood Middleton Day Centre is the lead partner of the **Enhance Project**, operating in the North West Region. The project has a formal partnership agreement in place among core partners. It has also formed informal partnerships with churches, organisations that provide furniture to people in crisis, and organisations that provide English classes for asylum-seekers and refugees.

As the lead partner, Brentwood Middleton Day Centre emphasised the importance of taking a **professional approach** to all aspects of the partnership and its work. Having appropriate **governance structures and policies in place** was considered crucial to effective partnership working. The policies can be discussed and changed to allow for flexibility and different ways of working among partners.

Brentwood Middleton Day Centre described the benefits of having clear governance structures and policies in place. However they also emphasised the importance of **listening to other partners**, thus bringing together effective governance processes with mutual trust and collaboration.

Why having strong governance arrangements is important:

- It provides helpful **structure** – which can be reviewed and modified – and a starting point to identifying how your partnership can improve.
- It can help manage **expectations**, demonstrating what appropriate conduct should be and the consequences that will result from inappropriate behaviour.
- It can benefit your partnership's **reputation** in the local area, providing evidence of professionalism and thoughtful risk management. This can build trust locally and strengthen future funding bids.



Once other agencies see that you have policies – it can be a simple thing such as a barring policy or a proper policy for complaints procedures or safeguarding policies, recording procedures, field procedures etc - they know you are a professional."

Lead partner staff

FOUNDATION 3: INFORMATION SHARING MECHANISMS

- Sharing knowledge and information between partner organisations can significantly increase the effectiveness and efficiency of crisis support:
 - Sharing information about beneficiaries appropriately can help different partners better understand the needs of each individual and the context of their crisis. In turn, this helps to make sure the **support provided is personalised**.
 - Sharing information on the profile of people within a community who need support, as well as evidence about the effectiveness of different services, can also lead to **operational improvements**.
- It is therefore important for partnerships to agree **information sharing protocols** at the outset. These protocols can describe the kind of information that is relevant and useful to share with partners and set out how this can be done ethically and securely (including adhering to GDPR requirements).
- In addition, some HtC partnerships reported using good digital **referral systems** and emphasised how invaluable these proved to be during the Covid-19 pandemic. An effective referral system can ensure timely access to support for beneficiaries, and improve efficiency by standardising information provided during the referral process.
- Building on this, many HtC partnerships described contributing to local **databases** or **networks**. These databases and networks help share learning and good practice, and provide updates and feedback from different organisations within the local area.

The database in [local area] for referrals between different organisations works very well, as long as it's kept up to date. We also have a social welfare alliance in [local area], for which we meet weekly to hear updates from each organisation, and discuss how cross referrals can take place."

Lead partner staff

The digital referral system in [local area] is very helpful. It pulls together six different crisis organisations, making their referral processes seamless."

Core partner staff

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EXAMPLE OF FOUNDATION 3: INFORMATION SHARING THROUGH LOCAL NETWORKS

Case study – Coventry Citizens Advice Rooted project



Coventry Citizens Advice is the lead partner organisation for the **Rooted** project. Rooted work closely with the Coventry Frontline Network. This partnership provides the Rooted project with the opportunity to share information with frontline professionals in the area who are part of the network. The information disseminated through the Coventry Frontline Network includes examples of **good practice, training opportunities available in the area, policy news**, and updates on **changes in legislation** relevant to the crisis support sector.

The partnership with the Coventry Frontline Network was viewed as a great way to share knowledge and information with other local organisations in a **supportive, safe, and inclusive way**. New frontline support workers in the area are invited to join the network when they start working for one of the organisations involved. This was described by the partnership as an effective way to familiarise new staff with relevant activities in the local area.

Information sharing through this partnership has also allowed Rooted support workers to provide feedback on experiences from the 'front line' to the Citizens Advice research and campaign teams. They have then **used this information to influence local policies and improve practices**.

“Having a strong referral pathway, supporting frontline workers and attending networks [are key things that support effective partnership working]. We have the Frontline network where we talk about different projects, and have built up the [Coventry Frontline Network], where best practice and feedback is shared. These make frontline staff feel supported.”

Lead partner staff

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FOUNDATION 4: A MIX OF EXPERTISE WITHIN PARTNERSHIPS

Every HtC partnership involves different organisations, each with unique skills and experience. For partnership working to be effective, it is important to consider the **strengths of different organisations** and how these can be used in a complementary way. This is particularly important when setting up new partnerships or bidding for funding with other organisations.

HtC partnerships described a number of benefits of having a range of expertise within a partnership:

- Beneficiaries usually require different kinds of support when facing crisis. Partnerships can be more effective if they include a organisations able to work together to offer support **better tailored to the needs of beneficiaries**.
- Allowing organisations to focus on their areas of expertise within a partnership can also **improve the overall quality of support** provided to beneficiaries.
- Streamlining referrals by referring beneficiaries to existing partners where there are already strong relationships in place. This can be **quicker and more effective** than referring to wider partners where ways of working may need to be established.

Case study - Oasis Community Housing



Oasis Community Housing is the lead partner organisation of the Help through Crisis project, operating in Gateshead. Their partnership comprises four partner organisations: Oasis Community Housing, Your Voice Counts, Gateshead Citizens Advice, and Gateshead Foodbank.

Oasis Community Housing considered carefully who would be best to partner with to deliver the support required for the HtC programme. They decided to partner with Gateshead Citizens Advice (CA) because it is one of the **biggest CA organisations** in the country and deals with a broad range of issues. Since Gateshead CA typically handles a high volume of short term interventions, Oasis Community Housing and Your Voice Counts are **well placed to focus on longer term and more intense support** work.

Oasis Community Housing also decided to partner with Gateshead Foodbank so that they could **reach beneficiaries who were at crisis point** and needed their immediate needs covered. They work with individuals identified at the Foodbank to address their longer term issues and focus on the root causes of their crisis.

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ONGOING BENEFITS OF PARTNERSHIP

WORKING AND OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

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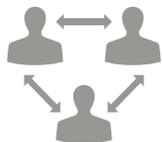
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EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP WORKING BRINGS A NUMBER OF POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTNERSHIPS AND BENEFICIARIES

Knowledge and data sharing



- **For partnerships:** Helps partnerships gain insights about beneficiaries' wider circumstances beyond their interactions with each organisation. For example, partners can share important information about an individual's crisis situation that may not otherwise be known. This can also highlight trends in the causes of crisis locally, creating opportunities to **work together to address underlying issues**.
- **For beneficiaries:** It means partnerships are better able to **tailor services to individuals** by signposting them to services being offered by partners, and **personalise support** through accessing shared beneficiary information.

Integration and efficiency



- **For partnerships:** Avoids **unnecessary duplication and reduces costs** overall. This has the potential to benefit each partnership organisation and ensure efforts are directed at supporting those in need.
- **For beneficiaries:** Reduces gaps in local provision to help ensure **joined-up support**. In doing so, the complex needs of those in crisis are better met. For example, providing food parcels at advice sessions.

Effective use of resources



- **For partnerships:** Brings together resources in a way that can be beneficial to partners. For example, **sharing venues or co-locating staff** together to maximise the number of support sessions available/feasible to run.
- **For beneficiaries:** Plays to each **organisations' strengths** which improves the support beneficiaries receive. Beneficiaries also benefit from the increased capacity of partners whose resources are shared.

Pooling capacity and expertise



- **For partnerships:** Shares the **capacity and expertise offered by a range of different organisations**, including the specialist knowledge often held by smaller organisations.
- **For beneficiaries:** Promotes innovative or highly targeted services that those going through crisis might not otherwise be able to access. This is achieved through these specialist services **working in partnership with larger, more established organisations** that have a greater reach.

PARTNERSHIP WORKING CAN ALSO BRING CHALLENGES THAT STRONG FOUNDATIONS HELP OVERCOME

Key challenges to partnership working raised include:

Different organisational agendas

Partnerships often involve organisations that vary in size and culture. This brings significant benefits, but each organisation within a partnership may have a **different set of organisational priorities**.

Having a **shared vision** at the start of the partnership, and continuing to revisit this during the partnership, can help ensure priorities are aligned.

Taking an appropriately **flexible, open approach** to delivery involves recognising the different organisational priorities and agreeing how these can be reflected in how beneficiaries are supported.

Lack of capacity to engage

Organisations are often very **busy with their day-to-day work** and meeting the immediate needs of beneficiaries. This can make it difficult for them to find time to engage with partner organisations.

By encouraging **co-operation** at the outset, partnerships can consider how best to share resources across the partnership.

Effective **information sharing systems** can help partnerships work efficiently. Having both formal and informal **communication** channels can help maintain co-operation while minimising burden.

Different expectations and inputs

Partners may have different **expectations of the project objectives and organisational roles**. Contributions from different partners may appear unequal, and this may require partners to challenge each other in the interests of beneficiaries.

Establishing **communication channels** early on can help to tackle difficulties with partners if they arise. It can be helpful at the outset of a partnership to work to resolve differences in expectations between partners.

This is linked to making sure partnerships have the **right partners involved** and have a **shared vision** that can help manage emerging difficulties.



It's important to be clear about what the objectives of the partnership are, and not get too bogged down in terms of the barriers in the way each partner works."

Core partner staff



That willingness to understand what people's roles and responsibilities are, to understand what they did and why they did it and how it could add additional benefit was really valuable for our partnership."

Core partner staff

PARTNERSHIP WORKING CAN ALSO OFFER WIDER BENEFITS TO ORGANISATIONS, BENEFICIARIES AND COMMUNITIES BEYOND HTC

Although the HtC programme will finish this year, the relationships built between different organisations are viewed as one of the legacies of the programme. Some of these relationships were already in place, while others have been formed through HtC. These ongoing relationships can provide many opportunities for further collaboration (and in some cases already have). Some examples raised by partnerships include:

Future funding bids and wider initiatives with partners

Some HtC partnerships are already in the process of **bidding together for further funding**, having established their partnership and refined their project during the HtC programme. Evidence gathered through local evaluations was mentioned as helpful to demonstrate the difference projects had made in bids.

Partnerships also described wanting to consider how the partnership approach and flexibility of HtC could be applied to other projects and initiatives undertaken by their organisation.



The success of [our project] and our partner organisations is a great example of how organisations can collaborate well. [We've been inspired by others around the country to look at others in local areas, [and think] how could we come together to have stronger offer, rather than trying to do something on your own."

Lead partner staff

Ongoing knowledge sharing and referral pathways

Having established effective ways of working, partnerships can **continue to refer to each other**. Partnerships mentioned wanting to maintain relationships to ensure that knowledge about beneficiaries is shared. Further meetings via existing forums and networks are likely to facilitate these ongoing relationships.

To demonstrate impact and influence others locally

Partnerships may be able to **conduct joint advocacy** to amplify their voice (and that of their beneficiaries) to advocate for change in local service provision. This advocacy could draw on monitoring and evaluation data to **provide evidence about the impact of the project or why it is needed**. Many partnerships have also joined local coalitions in response to Covid-19. They wanted these coalitions to offer useful ways to pool knowledge and carry out future influencing.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

A variety of additional resources are available on the [HtC Google Drive](#) and the [HtC document library](#):

Partnership working

- The previous [partnership working](#) learning paper contains ideas and learning related to working in partnerships.
- The [working with partners during Covid-19](#) learning paper includes the experiences of HtC partnerships and some of the changes to partnership working that resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic.
- The Local Government Association has [shared an article](#) describing how the Covid-19 pandemic has encouraged a renewed energy and shared purpose to partnership working across local government and community organisations. It also provides examples of where communications teams from local authorities and community organisations have come together with a shared approach to address the impact of Covid-19.
- NCVO has developed a [range of resources](#) on collaboration including a description of the different forms of collaborative working and links to wider resources.

Delivering during Covid-19

- The [adapting ways of working learning paper](#) includes examples of how HtC partnerships have changed their delivery approaches and started reaching people in new ways including by working with partners.
- The [planning and preparing learning paper](#) shares approaches for thinking about the future and planning for different scenarios that may result from the Covid-19 pandemic including working with new partners.
- The [effectively engaging with people online factsheet](#) contains links and resources for setting up online activities and building rapport online.

THANK YOU!

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

Brentwood Middleton Day Centre (The Enhance project)

Coventry CA (Rooted project)

East End CA (East End Crisis, Empowerment & Change project)

KeyRing - Living Support Networks (Ancora project)

Manchester Mind (Happy to Help project)

Oasis Community Housing (Help through Crisis project)

Telford & Wrekin CA (Helping Hands out of Hardship project)

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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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