

March 2021

Help through Crisis

Reflections on Covid-19

A Networking, Learning & Sharing Event Summary report

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. 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 events

From early June 2020 the Learning, Support & Evaluation (LSE) team developed and ran a series of webinars to support partnerships' learning and sharing during the Covid-19 pandemic. The webinars were intended to give partnerships the opportunity to share the challenges being faced, and explore the opportunities being taken to support beneficiaries during the pandemic. Webinar topics included:

- Supporting staff wellbeing
- Co-production
- Digital inclusion
- Planning and preparing for future changes in demand

The Reflections on Covid-19 Event built on the LSE webinar series and was devised as an informal networking event, in the spirit of the HtC National Events held annually from 2017 to 2019. This report provides a short summary of the key points that emerged during the informal discussions at the event.

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1. The Purpose and Content of the Reflections on Covid-19 Event



The Reflections on Covid-19 Event was held on 28th January 2021. It was attended by 32 people from 28 HtC partnerships who attended for two hours on Zoom. In addition, 2 people attended from the National Lottery Community Fund. The event had four aims:

- Share learning on the Covid-19 related outputs produced by the LSE team in 2020
- Hear from partnerships on their experiences of managing their HtC projects during Covid-19
- Reflect on the successes and challenges during the pandemic and how these can inform activities to be taken forward post-pandemic
- Capture learning from the event for wider dissemination.

The event began with a presentation from Daniel Cameron, Research Director at Ipsos MORI, summarising the HtC Covid-19 related outputs which are available [here](#). This initial presentation was followed by two presentations from HtC partnerships who spoke about their approaches to challenges posed by Covid-19:

- **Approaches to planning: Sarah Jones, Mencap Liverpool – Reaching Out & Moving on**
 - Sarah talked about how her team planned to help deal with the uncertainty that Covid-19 was causing. She highlighted three ways of working:

- Imaginatively: the pandemic gives us so many opportunities to work differently – focus on what you can do, especially on what you can do now, that you could not do before
 - Proactively: make decisions early and communicate your plan and your thinking. You can always change tack if you need to, but focusing on the sphere within your control really helps to give people certainty and psychological safety
 - Sensitively: recognise that everyone is dealing with different situations- often without having had the time to learn new skills.
- **Approaches to staff wellbeing: Andrew Beeput, the Bond Board – Homeless Advice and Resilience**
 - Andrew talked about intention, quoting Gary Zukav, author of The Seat of Your Soul: an intention is your motivation that creates consequences. He talked about the intention of self compassion and how it has different dimensions:
 - self judgement ('I'm not doing enough! I should be doing more') and the tumble dryer of emotions – going over things again and again.
 - self kindness: the flip side to self judgement - taking care of yourself – treating yourself with the same kindness you give to others.
 - common humanity: knowing that others are having the same experiences e.g. home schooling struggles.
 - mindfulness: being in the moment, taking different approaches to deal with the now.
 - Andrew said that their previous wellbeing policy now feels 'boiler plate' and they are now looking more specifically at creating connections between staff that build understanding.

We are grateful to our speakers who provided stimulus for the discussions which followed. The group was split into 4 break-out rooms to share lessons and experiences through the pandemic. The discussions were facilitated by Hopkins Van Mil, giving partnerships the opportunity to informally reflect on:

- Partnership responses to the crisis;
- The main challenges faced and how they have been addressed;
- Positive changes to working practices which they hope to take forward post-pandemic.

The rest of this report summarises the key points from these discussions.



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2. Responses to the crisis and challenges faced

2.1 Ways of working

'Ensure people have space in their day - and you may need to help them to take this. Dealing with crisis can often switch us into martyr mode- which can be hard to escape without help!

Lead partner staff

Home working

Partnerships discussed changes to the ways they have been working since the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020 and how managers and staff have responded to that. For some, there was an immediate shift to home working for all staff and to using digital tools to support beneficiaries. The challenge for a number of partnerships was shifting swiftly and effectively to remote working, as discussed in previous LSE outputs relating to [Staff Wellbeing](#) (July 2020), [Co-production](#) (August 2020) and [Digital Inclusion](#) (October 2020).

Some partnerships described the change in mindset this required for staff to understand that home-working is not '**skiving**' as it has been perceived to be by some prior to the Covid-19 crisis; a concept which was easier to accept when everyone was required by the government to 'Stay at Home'. A shift in culture where home-working became essential has resulted in many staff adapting well to how they work with beneficiaries and stakeholders, and has brought some benefits to HtC activities. These included:

- An increase in trust between staff and managers that the work will get done, even if it is done outside of 9-5 working hours.
- More flexibility in working with beneficiaries at times which might also suit them better. Partnerships viewed this as an important demonstration of the fact that HtC provides tailored support which meets the needs of the individual.

However, partnerships made it clear that homeworking has not been universally beneficial. For some staff and beneficiaries, home working risked '**meltdown**', caused by the impact of trying to juggle home schooling in particular with work commitments. Partnerships also reflected that whilst some efficiencies are made with not having to travel to work and to meetings, some things might take longer without the informal connection and communication with colleagues in the office.

In the office

Some partnerships have tried very hard to maintain a presence in a physical space. This has not necessarily been fixed throughout the pandemic but has shifted in response to the requirements of the lockdowns and tier system. Having fewer staff in at any one time has helped to keep office spaces Covid secure as well as using larger spaces for distanced face-to-face interactions with co-workers and beneficiaries. One partnership gave the example of using a large warehouse space as a pop-up drop-in

centre over the summer, which they would like to continue when Covid-19 restrictions are lifted. Partnerships who had retained some office-based face-to-face provision in lockdown said that it reassured them that people in the community were aware they were still providing support to those in need.

In the community

Staff have found that going to where people are in the community is sometimes the only answer to meeting beneficiaries' ongoing needs. Some partnerships have found that they cannot deliver the direct response needed over the phone or using other digital means. For example, one partnership described the support they have provided to people with learning disabilities, which involved going to people's doorsteps to ensure that they can be helped with Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Universal Credit applications. These partnerships understand that their beneficiaries could not be easily helped without face-to-face interaction with their key worker.

Another partnership spoke of support workers cycling forms over to beneficiaries who signed them through their window. This partnership felt that there should not be a need to bring people to their office to sign forms in the future and the cycle-based support was a useful mechanism to retain. Socially distanced walk and talk discussions in parks and high streets were also raised as a valuable way of supporting beneficiaries and maintaining trusted relationships. Partnerships also spoke of the additional health benefit of both the staff member and the beneficiary walking and being active in the fresh air.

2.2 Digital tools

'It has been a challenging time, but I also think it has been a spark for a lot of innovation. I know a lot of our team had been quite reticent to use digital in the past, but this situation has given us the impetus to embrace digital solutions, benefitting the team and the client group.'

Lead partner staff

Carefully selecting which digital tool to use for which beneficiary group was highlighted at the event as critical to establishing and maintaining contact. Partnerships said they preferred tools such as Zoom or WhatsApp which have video functions to try and maintain a face-to-face approach, because they felt that built trust with beneficiaries. They said that working in this way (via video) gives them a real glimpse into how people are living in their homes, so that project workers can get a better sense of how beneficiaries are coping. Some partnerships said this was an improvement to bringing people into the office because, on a video call, beneficiaries can show their support worker, for example, what the issues are with their accommodation.

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Many partnerships had continued to use the telephone as a communication method but reported that shifting to video methods was more effective. This is because beneficiaries do not always trust phone calls as a communication method. For example, some partnerships said that beneficiaries feel wary that the phone call might be coming from job or benefits-related organisations asking questions about their personal circumstances, to try and uncover benefit fraud and 'catch them out' in some way. Others spoke of using WhatsApp as a primary digital tool, particularly with younger beneficiaries who are more comfortable with it and use it regularly to talk to friends and family.

Whichever tool is used, many partnerships described putting in place a rota of weekly 'wellbeing calls' with beneficiaries to check-in with them, see how they are, and provide ad-hoc support as necessary. This has been important in such challenging times when beneficiaries are finding themselves with multiple unexpected crises and a valuable proxy for drop-in centres.

Digital inclusion has been a challenge for partnerships, with a recognition that technology may not be the answer for all beneficiaries. Where this is the case, socially distanced face-to-face activity has been used. Thinking laterally has been important for working digitally. Partnerships reported buying very cheap phones (i.e., those not worth selling on) which can be distributed to beneficiaries with data packages to ensure that, as a minimum, they can maintain contact with their beneficiaries. They have also set up partnerships with local charities, and/ or received emergency Covid-19 grants to pay for tablets for beneficiary use. By necessity, these partnerships have also needed to support their beneficiaries to use the equipment. This support has been delivered informally in-house, or by buying in short online courses, under the guise of supporting beneficiaries to do existing tasks they need to do (such as complete online forms). They have seen greater take-up when approaching digital support in this way rather than labelling it formally as 'digital training'. Partnerships have found that the staff time commitment it takes to get beneficiaries up and running with digital tools such as tablets cannot be underestimated. Receiving the equipment is only the first step in a longer process, which will often need to be repeated as beneficiaries, particularly in older age groups, struggle to get used to digital communications.

2.3 Shifts in hardship and hardship issues

'We are seeing a new group of people in hardship, lost jobs, never claim benefits, don't know how to navigate that system, haven't got a clue what they are entitled to. We see these people in hardship crisis want to address the crisis, but not the cause.'

Lead partner staff

'Clients are slipping through the gaps. Who are we missing?'

Lead partner staff

Engagement with those most in need

Those who attended the event spoke powerfully about the shift in the kinds of beneficiaries they have been working with during the pandemic. They described a new group of people in hardship: people who would not typically have fallen into crisis before but found themselves in need of crisis support because of, for example, sudden unemployment or losing all their zero-hour contract or freelance work. Partnerships see a difference between this new beneficiary group and those who previously accessed HtC support: this new cohort is able to navigate systems with the right advice. They will not need long-term support once they have been given this guidance, being better able to support themselves out of their crisis situation.

Concerns previously expressed by partnerships about the profile of beneficiaries during Covid-19 remain; people in the most hardship are more likely to struggle to navigate remote support and are more difficult to make contact with without drop-in centres and having a visible presence in the community. Partnerships continue to see plenty of new referrals but many of these referrals are for people who have no previous experience of the benefit system. As such these beneficiaries may need immediate help from partnerships, for example to navigate the benefit system, but once they have been given that guidance they are more able to address their own hardship issues than the beneficiaries that HtC partnerships were working with before the pandemic.

Partnerships therefore have a sense that they are less effectively reaching and engaging those who really need longer-term support to manage and move through their crisis situation. For example, one partnership had seen beneficiaries from the Roma community disappearing from their system since the first national lockdown. This group had previously been a quarter of their beneficiary group and the partnership has had to make a concerted effort to re-engage them in their support journey through partners and food banks. Partnerships described a shift in thinking that is required to re-connect with those most seriously affected by crisis, exacerbated by the pandemic, and those with the most entrenched problems who need longer term support to address the causes of the crisis they are experiencing (and not just the immediate issue).

A change in emphasis on the type of support needed

Whilst a number of the causes of crisis remain the same, some issues were highlighted by partnerships as having come to the foreground during the pandemic including:

- Unemployment
- Sudden debt
- Domestic abuse
- Bereavement

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The impact of, sometimes multiple, bereavements on beneficiaries' mental health has been recognised by partnerships as a serious issue impacting on other causes of crisis such as debt and homelessness. New strategies to support beneficiaries are required as, for many, a Zoom meeting does not feel like an appropriate mechanism to support people in this situation. Partnerships said they had struggled to find an alternative to a face-to-face drop in session and were still seeking solutions to this new challenge.

Partnerships referred to the fact that evictions are paused until after 21 February 2021, which they feel could be just delaying rather than preventing future evictions. Partnerships feel that, after this date, many people will have to face eviction and will no longer be able to defer addressing their rent arrears. Partnerships feel that after 21 February their staff will have to respond quickly to people who find themselves at risk of homelessness in the spring. To address this, one partnership described holding a series of 'homelessness awareness' webinars they are running for private landlords to try and prevent evictions.

Staff wellbeing

Related to the shifts in working practice and changes to the kinds of beneficiary crises that have come to the fore in the pandemic, partnerships continue to prioritise staff wellbeing. They stressed the impact of staff, volunteers and their own family members contracting Covid-19 and coping with hospitalisation and bereavement. Whilst a challenge, one partnership said they feel that this has brought staff and beneficiaries together, as everyone is impacted by the virus.

Making sure staff take the time they need to recover from interactions with individual beneficiaries and their own family situations has become central to wellbeing policies. One partnership spoke of ensuring that remote working is not a barrier to team support and used WhatsApp or Zoom check-ins to make sure people are coping with the emotional challenges being faced. Partnerships said it was essential to make sure team members took care of themselves by, for example, taking some time after each call with beneficiaries; making sure they take their allocated leave; and having time for social interaction with colleagues, albeit remotely. Partnerships spoke of their wellbeing policies becoming real and living documents in the pandemic, whereas before they might have only paid limited attention to creating and implementing the policy.

2.4 Responses to food poverty

'[Beneficiaries] did not know how to cook stuff that was coming from some of the lovely, beautiful food packages that restaurants and stuff were putting together. We needed to provide beige food for people ... stuff that people knew how to cook and that their kids would eat.'

Lead partner staff

'We had lots of donations of some quite random food, Greggs was giving us pasties and muffins, and crisps and you're thinking, "Actually, this is not the food we want to be giving people," ... I felt slightly uneasy.'

Lead partner staff

Partnerships shared their experience of the different types of food donations from different food outlets and the challenges this caused. Striking the right balance between health and convenience was highlighted. A tailored response to people in need of emergency food aid was stressed by partnerships at the event. Covid-19 was seen to have specifically increased food poverty and the subsequent call on food banks. Two different approaches were identified:

- The need to provide food that families knew how to cook and would eat
- Providing food which is healthy and tailored to the needs of the families involved.

Partnerships spoke about not wanting to create a dependency on emergency food aid while being concerned that, without such provision, people will not be able to adequately feed themselves or their families. Partnerships were keen to continue the ethos of HtC and ensure that people can claim the benefits they need and understand how to navigate the system in the long-term, to be able to be more resilient in the face of future crises (as well as handle immediate crisis).

2.5 A sustainable platform for crisis support

'Ordinarily a lot of my time would have been spent securing funding for our activity after Help Through Crisis ends, because it is by far and away our biggest lot of funding, and it is going to have a huge impact on the organisation when that funding end. Because of COVID, I have not spent the time I needed to on securing that funding, because all the funding that I have been working on has been COVID emergency grants, in order to fund the stuff that we are doing around the COVID work.'

Lead partner staff

'[We have] concerns about the funding side of things ... we have not been able to meet with people to do interviews and meeting scheduled project milestones has been a worry, that there are going to be issues from funders¹ that we're not delivering on these impacts that we said we would have.'

Lead partner staff

¹ The National Lottery Community Fund offered flexibilities around funding agreements during the Covid-19 crisis. This has included agreeing funding extensions with Funding Officers to enable grant holders to complete their projects.

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Staying true to the aims of HtC during the pandemic has been a challenge for partnerships, but one they are keen to address. Concerns were raised that, due to the constantly shifting backdrop of Covid-19, some feel they have not been able to collect the monitoring data in the last year that would demonstrate their successes with beneficiaries. They have found it a challenge to collect, monitor and analyse the data when working remotely and under pressure. However, all partnerships recognised that it is essential that they do collect data which demonstrates that they have been providing a sustainable platform for crisis support, and can do so in the future.

With HtC funding coming to an end in the spring, partnerships are concerned that the valuable and important work they have been doing to support people sustainably out of crisis will be difficult to maintain in the future. Partnerships spoke of the need not to reinvent the wheel once HtC ends, with services which are already providing excellent support in the sector finding the funding to continue their work. The uncertainty of how to achieve this during the pandemic compounds an already difficult situation. Partnerships also face the challenge that much of the local emergency funding provided by local authorities and local grant giving bodies must be spent by the end of the financial year on 31st March². Partnerships said they were concerned that applying for sustained funding to continue their work in the longer-term was a significant challenge they needed to address. Collectively drawing on the evidence base which had resulted from HtC was seen as a positive step many partnerships could use to make the case for funding from a variety of local, regional and national sources.

3. Positive steps towards a post-pandemic future

'The shift that we have gone through, rather than being office-based in the main, to being out there to support clients where they are comfortable, for me that is something we cannot undermine when the pandemic ends.'

Lead partner staff

Some examples of specific ways of working that partnerships have devised during the pandemic which have worked well and they wish to retain once the crisis is over include:

- **Flexible working with a blended approach** which incorporates working at home, in the office and in the community. This was seen to be helpful in recruiting people who have childcare and other caring responsibilities, supportive of staff wellbeing, and by many as a more productive way of working.
- **A blended approach to delivering beneficiary support** is something that partnerships equally want to take further in the future. For example, using WhatsApp rather than email, or meeting

² Emergency Covid-19 funding was also distributed by The National Lottery Community Fund on behalf of the government. Under the terms and conditions of this funding, Organisations were only able to apply for up to six months of costs which needed to be spent by the end of grant agreement.

beneficiaries for a walk in a park local to them rather than requiring them to come to the office, are all methods partnerships want to retain and develop. This is also in recognition that there have been fewer missed appointments as beneficiaries do not have to travel to attend their appointments.

- **More work to improve digital competency**, recognising that government agencies, banks and utility companies require individuals to complete forms and access online accounts. As such, crisis support projects need to continue to support beneficiary use of digital tools after the pandemic.
- **Reduction in bureaucracy** has become essential during the pandemic when face-to-face working is less feasible. Partnerships have seen that stream-lining their own procedures has been essential in responding to a constantly changing situation.
- **Planning for change, learning to be agile:** Partnerships felt that long-term planning and risk assessments will be approached differently in the future as a result, focusing on a range of scenarios, rather than one fixed vision for how things should be and working with shorter planning cycles.

Partnerships welcomed the opportunity of reflecting with colleagues on Covid-19 at the event,

'I will take forward the sheer positivity of this group as a whole. Notwithstanding the difficulties that we are all facing and the people who we are helping through crisis. I think it gives me hope to see that and not feel as marginalised somehow. I really enjoy seeing the group and understanding that we are not alone in our challenges. It gives me renewed vigour moving forward.'

Lead partner staff



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For more information

Website: [The National Lottery Community Fund – Insights from our funding](#)

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