

# WORKING WITH PARTNERS DURING COVID-19

Help through Crisis learning paper

October 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 (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 disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the value of partnership working. Many HtC partnerships have worked collaboratively to adapt their services and connect with other organisations as part of local community responses. HtC partnerships may also have stopped working with some partner organisations, for example where specific services have stopped or where there have been difficulties communicating during the pandemic.

This paper looks at partnership working in HtC in the context of Covid-19, using insights from [our previous learning paper on partnership working](#) as well as twenty interviews conducted with partnerships during summer 2020. The paper is structured as follows:

- 1. The first section provides a summary of the previous partnership working learning paper.** It describes the types of partnership working involved in the HtC programme and some of the key ingredients for effective partnership working. It also provides an update on how these factors relate to experiences during Covid-19.
- 2. The second section explores in greater depth some of the changes to partnership working** which have resulted from the Covid-19 pandemic. It draws on case studies illustrating how HtC partnerships have worked with others as part of local responses.
- 3. The paper concludes with reflections and questions** partnerships might want to consider as they work with partners in future.

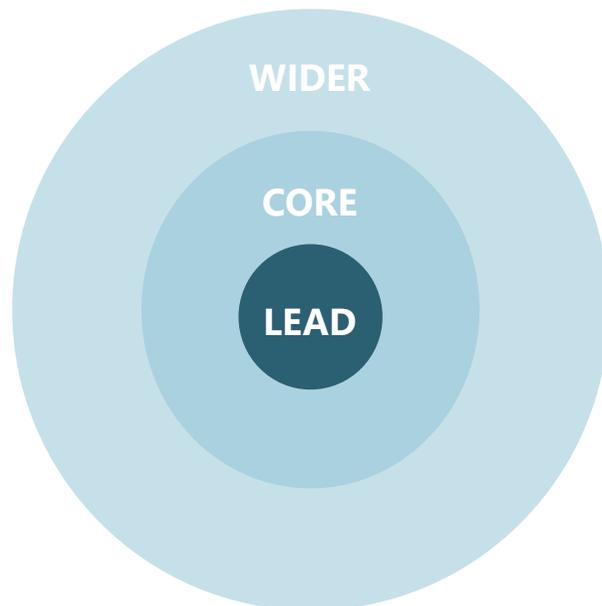


2019 partnership working learning paper

# 1. PARTNERSHIP WORKING IN THE HTC PROGRAMME

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.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, HtC partnerships have adapted how they work in response to social distancing measures and remote working guidelines. This is described further in the [adapting ways of working learning paper](#) (TNLCF 2020). The pandemic has also affected how HtC partnerships work with other organisations, and which organisations are involved in delivering crisis support to people using HtC services. In some cases, HtC partnerships have continued to work effectively together, with closer working relationships. In other cases, HtC partnerships have started working with new organisations – either through establishing referral pathways or as part of local voluntary coalitions that meet to discuss services and coordinate the local response to the Covid-19 crisis.



The previous learning paper on partnership working described three 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.

**There is some evidence that HtC partnerships have started working more with wider partners in response to the Covid-19 pandemic as voluntary organisations and mutual aid groups have developed to support people facing crisis.**

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# KEY INGREDIENTS TO PARTNERSHIP WORKING

Our previous learning paper identified three 'key ingredients' to partnership working which cut across the HtC programme:

## Co-operation

Ensuring shared decision-making and mutual co-operation is something partnerships have been working towards since the beginning of the HtC programme. Collaboration can be enhanced when core partners feel there is genuine co-operation across a partnership built on relationships of trust. This avoids the power dynamic being too skewed towards one partner – for example if decision-making is concentrated in one organisation in a way that reduces effectiveness. A co-operative approach to partnership working allows partnerships to:

- ➔ **Benefit from the capacity and expertise offered by a range of different organisations working in crisis support, including the specialist knowledge often held by smaller organisations.**
- ➔ **Integrate services and reduce gaps in local provision to help ensure joined-up support. In doing so, the complex needs of those in crisis are better met.**

## Communication

Communication among partners is vital in ensuring there is a clear understanding about roles and tasks between partners. The frequency and format of conversations will differ, especially if held remotely. However, each meeting should have a clear purpose with an agreed agenda for discussion e.g. project delivery, revision of partnership agreements (either formal or informal) or clarifying understanding between partners. Creating a time and space to be open and honest with partners strengthens the effectiveness of the partnership and helps to:

- ➔ **Avoid unnecessary duplication and reduce costs overall. This has the potential to ensure efforts are directed at supporting those in crisis.**
- ➔ **Gain insights by sharing information. This could be about peoples' circumstances beyond their contact with an individual service, or about the wider context in an area. There is further detail about working in partnership to reach people in the [Reaching Out paper](#).**

## Flexibility

A flexible approach to partnership working recognises the value of collaboration and incorporates different ways of working among partnerships. During the pandemic, partnerships have been adapting to new ways of working in response to government guidelines and the wider context. The ability to change an approach to cater for the strengths of different partners and the needs of people in crisis can enhance partnership working and benefit services by enabling a project to:

- ➔ **Tailor services to an individual by signposting them to services being offered by other members of the partnership.**
- ➔ **Play to each organisations' strengths, improving the overall service and experience people receive.**
- ➔ **Bring in new partners to meet the changing needs of people in crisis.**

## 2. PARTNERSHIP WORKING IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed how HtC partnerships work. HtC partnerships have had to redesign delivery models and develop new ways of working to reflect the changing needs of people in crisis. This has included changing how they work in partnership with other organisations – including both formal and informal partners.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has created significant upheaval for HtC partnerships, it has also brought a shared sense of purpose across organisations in local areas as they come together to support people. This sense of working towards a common goal has helped HtC partnerships to work effectively with new and existing partners, improve communication by breaking down some of the previous barriers to collaboration and avoid duplicating efforts. For instance, many partnerships have been collaborating to deliver food parcels and make sure those shielding have access to prescriptions and medicine. HtC partnerships have also moved quickly to respond to changing circumstances. Examples of this include the following:

- Changes to **the organisations involved in a HtC partnership** with lead partners stopping working with some organisations and starting new relationships with others. This has happened by building formal referral pathways as well as joining new local 'coalitions' developed in response to Covid-19.
- Changes to **how partners communicate**, reflecting the wider shift to online communication. This has changed how HtC partnerships have meetings, often using online platforms instead of meeting face to face. HtC partnerships have also increasingly been raising awareness of their services so that other organisations in their local area can get in touch about working together or referring people on to HtC services.
- Changes to **the services delivered by partner organisations** to reflect the changing needs of people in crisis. The ways in which HtC partnerships have taken a flexible approach to service delivery during Covid-19 are described further in the [adapting ways of working learning paper](#) (TNLCF 2020).

In some respects this whole Covid-19 crisis has really had some very, very positive effects on partnership working...People have realised 'I can't work on my own here, I have got to get in touch with somebody who might know about this'."

Lead partner staff

The fact is that we now all realise that we have to work together to be able to get through this particular crisis."

Lead partner staff

The community as a whole has really come together."

Lead partner staff

# HTC PARTNERSHIPS' INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY RESPONSES

HtC partnerships described how a large number of local voluntary organisations and mutual aid groups have developed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Partnerships emphasised the 'vibrancy' of the community sector in their area as new groups and volunteers have started to deliver food and keep in contact with vulnerable residents. Some community-wide responses have involved a coalition of different organisations including: local authorities, statutory services, local restaurants, foodbanks, community organisations, local charities, faith organisations and mutual aid groups.

HtC partnerships have been involved in these more informal 'coalitions', signposting to support, attending meetings, including with their service users, and receiving referrals from other organisations involved. However, some HtC lead partners who provide advice services have been unable to formally work with mutual aid groups due to their safeguarding processes. Some mutual aid groups have not been fully vetted and their members may not always have Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks having been set-up quickly in response to the pandemic.

In some areas, emergency responses involving HtC partnerships have been formally co-ordinated, bringing together the increasing number of voluntary organisations delivering support in response to Covid-19. Local authorities have often co-ordinated this response but, in some areas, charities have played this co-ordinating role. HtC partnerships highlighted that managing local responses in this way has helped ensure resources are used effectively, reduced duplication, and helped to connect services with people in crisis. Effective co-ordination has been supported by organisations sharing the same goals – notably ensuring all residents have access to food and vulnerable groups are supported through Covid-19.



**There's an amazing, vibrant third sector in [area]. There is that coalition of local organisations communicating regularly, posting about the particular bits of work we've been doing as a response to Covid-19."**

Lead partner staff



Community Links: Help Through Crisis works with vulnerable people in Newham to tackle the underlying causes of their crisis through advice on issues such as employment, homelessness, debt and health problems. Unlike many councils, Newham does not have a Council for Voluntary Services (CVS). Responding to this 'gap', the voluntary sector in the area formed a partnership network of voluntary and community services called '[One Newham](#)'.

While 'One Newham' was created a few years ago, the existence of this network proved invaluable during the pandemic. In an effort to provide a co-ordinated local response to Covid-19, 'One Newham' **appointed a temporary 3-month staff member** with responsibility for co-ordinating all voluntary and community services in the area. Having a specific co-ordinator committed to sharing information and fostering strategic engagement between voluntary and community groups in Newham was effective in avoiding duplication and bringing organisations together. This co-ordination effort resulted in partners and members of 'One Newham' holding more meetings, sharing up to date information, communicating more frequently and working in a more joined up way to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. This has strengthened the links between local organisations and improved partnership working.

# SIGNPOSTING HAS BECOME MORE IMPORTANT

There have been changes to the type and number of organisations working in local areas in response to Covid-19. While there has been a growth of new voluntary organisations and mutual aid groups, other voluntary organisations have faced significant challenges to delivering services during the pandemic and have been unable to operate as usual. For example, some organisations have had financial difficulties with staff being placed on the furlough scheme. Others have been prevented from working from home due to a lack of technology such as work laptops or phones. These challenges have stopped organisations from being able to support people in crisis and continue to collaborate with HtC partnerships.

Changes in local areas in response to Covid-19 have made effective signposting to different services even more important. Appropriate signposting helps local organisations – including HtC partnerships – to know what services are available in the area so they can refer the people they work with to wider specialist support. This helps to ensure people receive the help they need to move on from crisis. Some organisations have provided online information about local support and have been updating these resources as the situation changes. For example, one HtC partnership described a local organisation using a Facebook page to share information about places where people can access food. The partnership uses this site to get up-to-date information on where to signpost the people they support. Other HtC partnerships attend regular meetings led by voluntary sector organisations, allowing them to signpost to other services and discuss referrals.



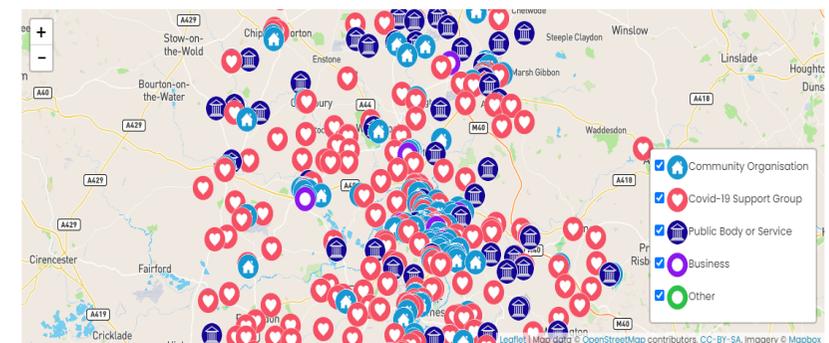
I was putting together an update on what is available for advisors. There is stuff out there, but if you need to reach your hand out at a particular time, getting that joined up approach isn't that easy."

Lead partner staff

The 'Oxfordshire All In' initiative aims to connect community organisations and *"join the dots [between organisations] to create an easier working landscape for everyone."*

One approach is to use **online tools to signpost organisations** to each other. Their [website](#) features an interactive map (right) showing different community organisations, Covid-19 support groups, public services/bodies and businesses in the local area which are working together in response to Covid-19. The map provides contact details for each organisation, as well as a short description of the work they are doing and a link to their website. The details for Citizens Advice Oxford have been added to the website, supporting them to work with other organisations in the area.

## Covid-19 Oxfordshire Support



Join the map!

# RAISING AWARENESS OF HTC THROUGH LOCAL NETWORKS

HtC partnerships have raised awareness of the support they offer as a way of maintaining partnership working during the Covid-19 pandemic. Finding innovative ways of doing this has been especially important without regular face to face meetings or more informal conversations with partners who work nearby or in the same building.

In some cases, existing relationships have become more important as partners already know and trust each other and have found it easier to meet virtually without the need for travel. Existing relationships built on trust have supported partners to transition to online ways of working as organisations already have an understanding of each organisation. However, others have found it more difficult to keep in touch with partners without the opportunity to catch up informally. For example, some staff members miss being able to see partners at informal sessions they previously attended each week.

This has made it important for HtC partnerships to stay in touch with other organisations and raise awareness of the services they provide by being involved in informal local networks developed in response to Covid-19. HtC partnerships have added information about their project to newsletters and lists of resources shared by co-ordinating organisations helping to reach people who may not have previously been aware of their services.



The nature of online calls [with partner organisations] is that pleasantries and chit chat gets cut out because in big screen format calls are therefore more purposeful. The downside is not having that relationship [with partners]. True trust comes in here and a level of understanding about what you are about and trying to achieve."

Lead partner staff

In Cheetham and Crumpsall, a newspaper has been started as a way to communicate what has been happening to support people during the Covid-19 pandemic. The newspaper is for everyone who lives and works in the local area. It has been funded by the NHS for six issues and is published digitally and in print. A number of organisations are collaborating to produce the newspaper.

Staff at the Welcome Centre have been working on the editorial board of the newspaper. The local Voluntary Community & Social Enterprise (VCSE) steering group has been co-ordinating the paper by speaking to different organisations and members of the local community including GPs and the local police, to encourage them to contribute pieces. The paper has also profiled and interviewed local councillors and MPs about the local authorities' Covid-19 response.

Through their involvement, the Welcome Centre has been able to **publicise their Covid-19 response** to ensure people in the community know they are there to offer support. This is also a way to encourage local organisations to get in touch about potential referrals or other opportunities to work together.



## 3. REFLECTING ON PARTNERSHIP WORKING DURING COVID-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected how HtC partnerships work together as well as how they work with other organisations in their area. There have been significant changes to the voluntary sector landscape in some areas, as well as changes in demand for services from people facing crisis. HtC partnerships described how collaboration has worked over the past few months and what more organisations could do to work effectively together. Drawing on HtC partnerships' suggestions, the following points are worth considering further:

### Using technology effectively

There have been clear benefits to using digital technology to communicate with partners including reducing travel time and feeling more like one team. However, there have also been challenges for building new relationships based on trust and losing the informal connections some staff previously took for granted.

### Taking part in the wider community response

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a growth in community 'coalitions' in some areas with activities being co-ordinated by the local authority or a local umbrella organisation. This has allowed HtC partnerships to make new connections and signpost to services.

### Raising awareness of HtC services

Recent changes in the voluntary sector as a result of Covid-19 have led some organisations to stop providing services while new groups have been set up to support the Covid-19 response. HtC partnerships have been raising awareness of their work to help reach these new services and ensure they can reach those in crisis.

### Reflection questions

- How could a HtC partnership blend online approaches with other forms of communication?
- What techniques could organisations use to re-create more informal moments or build trusting relationships?

- Is a HtC partnership linked with local community 'coalitions'? How could the partnership get more involved?
- What local connections is a partnership missing or would value learning more about?

- Are local organisations (including new organisations) aware of what a HtC partnership provides?
- How could a partnership raise greater awareness in creative ways?

# FURTHER RESOURCES

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

## Partnership working

- The [partnership working](#) learning paper contains ideas and learning related to working in partnerships.
- 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.

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# THANK YOU!

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

*Cambridge Crisis Network*

*Wyre Forest Nightstop*

*Newcastle Law Centre*

*Lancashire Citizens Advice*

*Mid-Norfolk Citizens Advice*

*Access Dorset*

*Birmingham Rathbone*

*Citizens Advice in North and West Kent*

*Women's Centre Ltd – Moving On*

*MindOUT*

*Oxford Citizens Advice*

*Mancroft Advice Project (MAP)*

*Better Leeds Communities*

*Hull & East Riding Citizens Advice*

*Ravenscliffe Community Association*

*Community Links Trust*

*Rossendale and Hyndburn Citizens Advice*

*Stockton Citizens Advice*

*Wai Yin Society*

*Urban Outreach*

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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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