

Help through Crisis



Final Evaluation Report for Salford Citizens Advice

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The Sustainable Housing & Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU - University of Salford) is a dedicated multidisciplinary research and consultancy unit providing a range of services relating to housing and urban management to public and private sector clients. The Unit brings together researchers drawn from a range of disciplines including social policy, housing management, urban geography, environmental management, psychology, social care and social work.

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1 ANTI-POVERTY ACTION

The causes of poverty are reduced resources or increased personal needs and the costs of meeting them. Life events such as being ill, redundancy or relationship breakdown are common triggers for poverty. Unemployment and low-paid jobs lacking prospects and security is a main feature for those individuals and families who find themselves in hardship crisis. In addition to this, an ineffective benefit system (low levels of welfare benefits) for some people – either in work, seeking work or unable to work because of health or care issues – is not enough to avoid poverty; when combined with other resources and high costs (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2020¹). Throughout the duration of the Help through Crisis (HtC) project (2017-2021) the project workers and cited partner agencies have worked tirelessly to support those in crisis and navigated a confusing benefit system, often underpinned by errors and delayed payments. One service user decided not to take further paid work due to the negative effects upon claiming benefits on behalf of her family. The high costs of essential utilities also compound poverty issues for most people. Many service users interviewed by the evaluation team lived alone or lived in single parent families, which had an impact upon potential coping strategies without supportive networks to call upon in times of crisis. In addition, the impact of mental health issues and/or traumatic life events can also link with homelessness and substance misuse. Being able to ‘solve/alleviate the problems’ of poverty and thereby reduce hardship crisis for people, needs a cohesive vision (and actions) agreed between relevant parties. These include third sector agencies, (charities, voluntary and community groups), local government and not least the support from central government. To some extent, this longitudinal project, funded through an English National Lottery Community Fund, has attempted to capture the changing needs of those in crisis, over time within a given context and culture. It is envisaged therefore, that the impact of the collective evidence (and informed voices) from all the English projects will create a transformative ‘catalyst for change’ to better inform the political landscape. Not least, reinforced through the midst of the coronavirus outbreak – a period of inequality, turbulence and insecurity for most, especially those either living on low incomes, welfare benefits or find themselves (post COVID-19) unemployed.

¹ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2020) Annual Report.: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/>

2 INTRODUCTION

This final evaluation report is based upon the progress and outcomes of the HtC project over a five year period (2017-2021). The final evaluation report presents the overall findings based upon five years of data collection and analysis. Inclusive of service users/citizens (beneficiaries), local third sector partner agencies & cost benefit analysis(s) undertaken about the 'value for money' component of the project, overall. The evaluation will also build upon the initial conclusions from the previous annual Interim Reports produced in 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2020-2020 by the evaluation team, associated with SHUSU. It will focus upon achievements and, also, recommendations for future sustainability.

2.1 Background

In February 2017, Salford Citizens Advice (SCA) commissioned The Sustainable Housing and Urban Studies Unit (SHUSU) at the University of Salford to undertake an evaluation of the HtC project. HtC is a partnership initiative led by SCA involving nine partner agencies, all based in Salford, but geographically located across the city. It was successfully awarded five years of funding from the Big Lottery Community Fund (BLCF) (2017-2021). The overall evaluation of the HtC project ran concurrently with the delivery of services over a five year period.

The HtC initiative was designed to fund projects that 'draw on the strengths and personal experience of those experiencing hardship so that they can overcome difficulties and be ready for future opportunities and challenges' (Big Lottery Fund, 2015). To do this, it sought proposals which could demonstrate best practice and collaborative initiatives, with a view to achieving the following outputs:

- Provide targeted and tailored practical advice
 - Use the strengths and expertise of people with lived experience
 - Put people at the centre of their lived experience
 - Tackle immediate needs
 - Identify and work with those who find it difficult to access mainstream services
 - Collaborate with people with lived experience and partner agencies
 - Learn from what you do and share with others
 - Have an exit strategy and consider what is next.
- These activities were aimed at delivering the programme's four outcomes (see below), all of which need to be met by the SCA partnerships.

The four outcomes are:

1. People who have experienced hardship crisis are better able to improve their circumstances.
2. People who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis are better able to plan for the future.
3. Organisations are better able to support people to effectively tackle hardship through sharing learning and evidence.
4. Those experiencing, or who are at high risk of experiencing, hardship crisis, have a stronger, more collective, voice, to better shape a response to their issues.

Detailed explanations were required with regard to the practical aspects of project delivery (the approach) and evidence of previous expertise in the field ('experience'), but a series of indicators were requested to measure progress towards the four outcomes. In their application, SCA provided a detailed plan to manage and review their progress towards both indicators and outcomes. Specific commitments included the 'gathering and sharing of learning', both internally among project partners, and involving service users as well as the production of 'rich data showing innovation, good practice, examples of successful partnership work and service user involvement' (Salford Citizens Advice, 2015).

Indicators were set to monitor progress throughout the project. SCA submitted six monthly and yearly progress reports to the BLF, outlining progress. For example, SCA aimed to ensure that five hundred people per year experiencing hardship would be better able to improve their circumstances. Similarly, a target of two hundred individuals per year reporting that they were better able to plan for the future was also agreed. Indicators were established to evidence the efficacy of partnership working, shared learning, and a collective voice for those experiencing hardship crisis. The project outcomes and change indicators are presented in Table 1.

It should be noted however, that years 4 and year 5 (2020-2021) have been seriously affected in terms of the onset of COVID-19.

Table 1: Outcomes and Change Indicators

Outcomes: BLF	Change Indicators: Salford Citizens Advice	7/12/20-30/4/21
1. People who have experienced hardship are better able to improve their circumstances.	i. Advice and information interventions resulting in people improving their circumstances	550(service users)
2. People who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis are better able to plan for the future	i. Advice and information interventions that resolve peoples' social welfare problems enabling them to concentrate on opportunities for self-development	1100 (issues) (2 issues per service user)
3. Partner agencies are better able to support people to effectively tackle hardship due to sharing learning and evidence	i. Provide training sessions and workshops to agencies in Salford to equip them with improved skills and knowledge to tackle hardship crisis More focused during the COVID-19 pandemic	Age UK Salford: 8 workshops: welfare benefits, debt, money advice and health and community care
	ii. Will work with agencies in Salford to enable them to share their expertise and learning to improve skills and knowledge to tackle hardship crisis Evaluation by University of Salford includes addressing partner agencies views each year	9 partner agencies interviewed
4. Those experiencing or are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis have a stronger, more collective voice, to better shape responses to their issues.	i. Evaluation by University of Salford includes addressing service users' views each year COVID-19 has significantly affected the ability to interview those experiencing hardship during 2020-2021	36 individual interviews Client Council Group (n=3)
	ii. We will involve service users in each agency we deliver service users from	As cited above

2.2 Aims of the Evaluation

The main aim is to evaluate performance of the SCA indicators in relation to the four outcomes, pre-determined by the BLF. Interviews with service users and partner agencies, as well as quantitative data sources (e.g. Casebook service user monitoring of financial benefits, bi-annual and annual reports) have helped to determine to what extent agencies felt progress has been achieved. In addition to this, the evaluation team has also played an advisory role in terms of the management of data collection used to evidence performance (SCA indicators) against the outcomes.

2.3 Ethical Approval January 2020

An updated research ethics application was submitted and approved by the University of Salford on 9 January 2020. Subsequently, exchanges between the evaluation team and HtC project management centred around which data most accurately reflected the targets in the indicators and how it was to be interpreted. Provisions were made to develop procedures to allow data to be shared between SCA and the evaluation team via specific data consent forms. Contact has been maintained with HtC staff throughout the process. These have been supplemented by email exchanges with project staff.

3 EVALUATION METHODS

This final report is based upon key activities over the past 5 years:

- Collation and analysis of HtC monitoring information (statistics)
- Partner Agencies interviews (n= 7)
- Project Worker interviews (n=3)
- Service User interviews (n=36)
- Service User Client Council interview (n=3)
- Economic analysis of the social and financial returns on investment (CBA)

Please note: Service User interviews no-shows (n=10)

Collation and analysis of existing monitoring information

For the purposes of the evaluation, we have drawn on information that is more readily quantifiable in order to assess the breadth of support offered by HtC. This includes numbers of people supported and associated demographic information and number of issues addressed (see Table 4).

Limitations within the Data

It is also important to note, that there has been a change in the monitoring system used during the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that it is not possible to conduct year on year comparisons, and also, that records may not capture the full range of activity as staff have taken time to adjust to the new systems. A further limitation in the data is that monitoring processes do not directly align with HtC outcomes and indicators, which means that it is not always possible to directly evidence achievements against the outcomes.

Table 2 Partner Agency Interviews

Partner Agency	Services Provided	Contribution
Loaves & Fishes (Manager/support worker)	Community centre/meals/advice & support	Interview (n=1) successful Interview (n=2) successful
Wood Street Mission (children's charity) (Manager)	Smart Start School uniforms/Family Basics	Interview successful
Mustard Tree (Manager)	Helps people to secure better accommodation and economic wellbeing	Interview successful
Revive (Manager)	Immigration issues	Interview successful
Valley Community Centre (Salford) (Community Worker)	Coordination of local groups held at the centre. One example, early morning breakfast club	Interview successful
Lark Hill Primary School (Salford) (Social Worker)	Children & families in need	Interview successful
Health Improvement Team (Irlam) (Senior Community Worker)	Multi-agency forums and local community support/food bank links	Interview successful
Parents/Carers	Together@44 Group	Interview planned, but Venue closed due to (COVID)
Food Banks	Irlam & Cadishead & Salford Central	Contacted/ not responded (impact of COVID)
Staff member	Emmaus	Contacted/not responded (impact of COVID)
Staff member	Humankind	Responded/ no confirmation date for interview (impact of COVID)

Table 3 Service User Interviews

Individual Interviews	Female/Male	Private Office/home visits
36	21 Female/15 male	Confidentiality maintained
Client Council Group	1 female/2 males	Interviewed at Loaves & Fishes

3.1 Partner Agency Interviews

To date, we have conducted (n=9) interviews with members of partner agencies. A small number (n=4) of additional partner agencies were contacted during Sept-Nov (2020), most of whom did not respond to the request to be interviewed. Humankind however, did respond, wishing to set an alternative date for interview. After several attempts to confirm a date, this did not materialise.

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, including questions about any previous interactions with SCA or similar advice services. The focus of the interviews was to engage partners and enable them to reflect upon the process of initial engagement with SCA. In addition, discuss their specific role within the community and how an effective partnership arrangement had facilitated benefits for individuals/families that had experienced hardship whilst in a 'crisis'. Finally, to establish whether a coordinated (network) approach has been created to support the needs of individuals and families within local communities across the city.

3.2 Service User Interviews

To date, we have conducted (n=36) interviews with service users. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, including questions about any previous interactions with SCA or similar advice services, their experience of receiving support from HtC including how they came into contact with it, and whether the intervention has led to a more stable and sustainable future. All the interviews were set up in a private room at a local community centre for convenience and/or within the home environment to maintain confidentiality. Participants were contacted after giving initial agreement to participate to the HtC project workers during the course of accessing SCA/HtC services.

3.3 Economic analysis: Cost Benefit Analysis Approach

The New Economy model of Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) was utilised along with their Unit Cost Database. This allowed us to present the financial and economic (public value) case. We understand the limitations of SCA but see it as a useful tool for policy evaluation and learning when used within a multi-layered analysis in conjunction with other methods. The financial and economic return on investment was calculated for every £1 invested in the project, along with other costs arising from the project, such as service users successfully claiming state benefits to which they are entitled.

Budget actuals were obtained from the project management team in order to gain an accurate understanding of costs. The benefits focused on improved well-being for individuals and families, along with increased employment, and reduced housing evictions and homelessness. Qualifiers were applied, including optimism bias correction (i.e., accounting for the level of confidence in the data); drop-off (i.e., the way in which some participants tend to revert back to pre-intervention status over time); and deadweight (i.e., business as usual, or what would have happened without the intervention).

4 DATA ANALYSIS

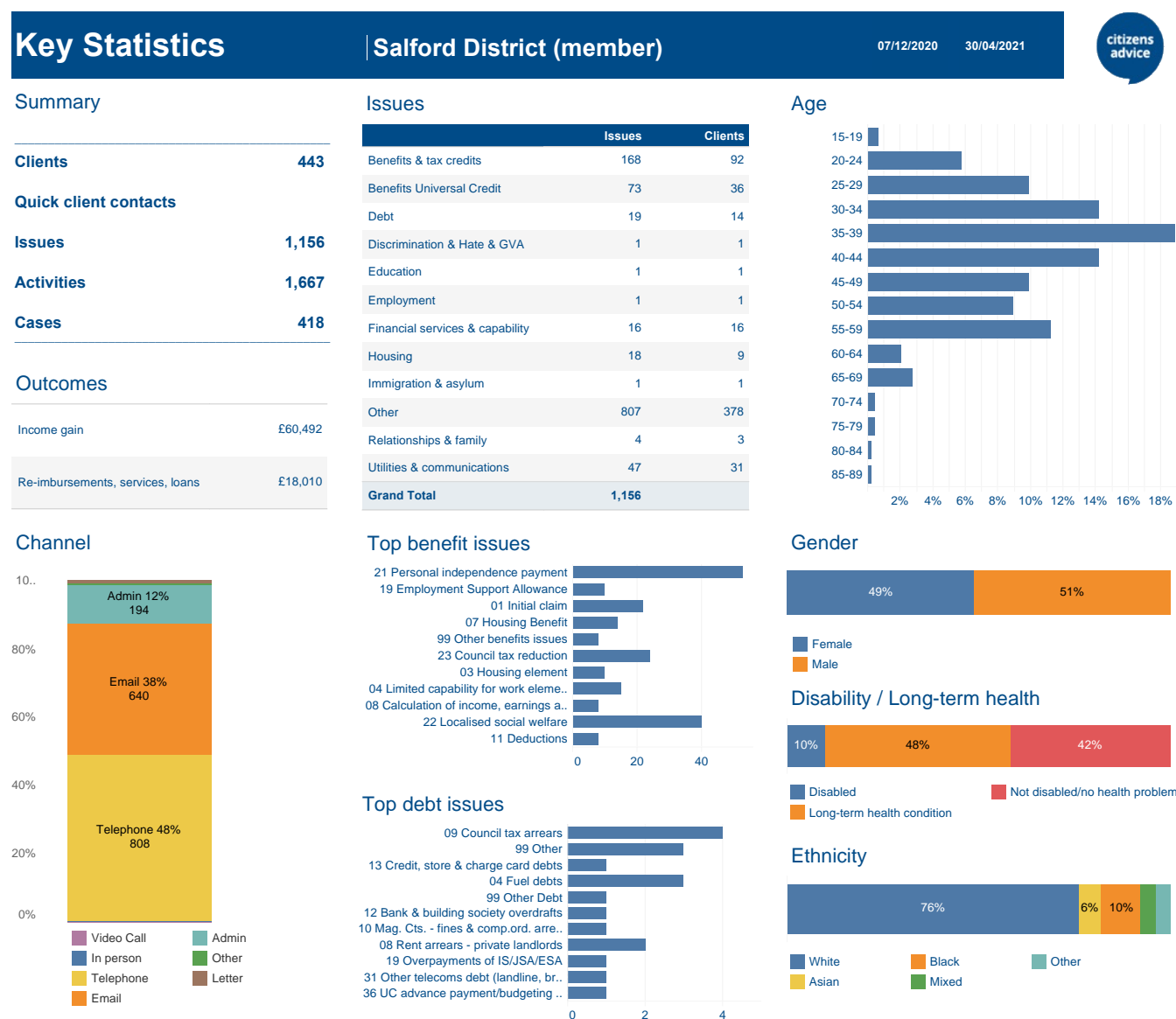
This section evaluates the data gathered from SCA taking into consideration the change indicators previously set by SCA in response to the pre-determined outcomes (4) set by the BLF. Data was utilised from the existing monitoring information, interviews with service users and partner agencies. The data presented below (Table 4) represents the quarter December 2020 -April 2021 – the final phase of the HtC project.

In terms of the qualitative data (interviews), the use of NVIVO (12) software was used to identify relevant themes which related to the SCA indicators and evaluated against the outcomes.

Response from the HtC Project Team

The HtC project team has maintained contact with the foodbanks to ensure food, relevant information and advice was available to those individuals who needed it. Referrals from Salford City Council (emergency response) have also been responded to, alongside emergency welfare services, known as Salford Assist. SCA has provided face-to-face appointments in their local office. The project team responded flexibly within difficult circumstances i.e. maintained various communications through telephone, email and video calls. The team followed government guidance in terms of COVID-19 when dealing with the most vulnerable individuals and complex benefit problems.

Table 4: Collation and analysis of existing monitoring information



During the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic and restrictions across Greater Manchester, the final phase of the HtC project faced a number of challenges when compared to the pre-determined prevention approach already planned for. That was to enable service users to become more self-reliant through SCA contacts and make informed choices about their circumstances. However, an immediate 'hands-on' approach was more appropriate during the emergency phases, having to rely upon (limited) neighbouring voluntary agencies to support those most in need. In addition to which some partner agencies had no staff to maintain a service and/or very limited flexibility about delivery. This also affected the (wider scope) operational functions of SCA, in terms of the number of service users supported during the peak phases of the pandemic and the availability of established links with other partner agencies.

SCA returned to face-to-face interviews from June 2020.

As illustrated in Table 4, the statistics identified the most prevalent issues which affected individuals and families. For example, welfare benefits (universal credit), housing/ rent/utilities arrears and not least, welfare support issues for those who had a disability and/or long-term health conditions. As mentioned, communication channels were maintained; service users/citizens used either telephone or email contact as well as face-to-face.

5 COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS

We used the New Economy model of Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA) together with their Unit Cost Database to conduct ex-post CBA of the project for five years from April 2016, and present the financial and economic case². There are, of course, limitations to CBA, but it is nevertheless a useful project evaluation tool when used alongside other methods within a multi-layered analysis³. Whereas previous reports each examined only a year of data, this time we have analysed the project as a whole. These five-years overall figures again show positive financial and public financial returns on investment. The same project outcomes were used as in our earlier reports. These were ‘increased employment’ (for those on out-of-work benefits); ‘reduced housing evictions’; ‘reduced statutory homelessness’; and ‘improved well-being’ (for individuals and families).

The following population data were used to inform our analysis. Approximately 258,800 people were resident in Salford, with 14,170 people claiming out-of-work benefits⁴. The affected population was assumed to be 3495 in terms of those at risk of being evicted from their homes, based on Salford’s share of people who were at risk of eviction from rented properties (i.e., subject to landlord possession claims), over the last five years from Quarter 2 2016 to Quarter 1 2021⁵. Similarly, an affected population of 6910 statutory homeless people was utilised based on households assessed as owed a homeless relief duty in Salford in the last five years⁶.

For improved individual well-being, the affected population was the 3082 people that Salford Citizens Advice has supported through the HtC project in the last five years. As noted above, the number of people seeking support through HtC has increased since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. For family well-being, the affected population was calculated as 966, based on

² HM Treasury (2014). *Supporting public service transformation: cost benefit analysis guidance for local partnerships* <http://www.neweconomymanchester.com/media/1443/2765-pu1617-cba-guidance-020414-1312-final.pdf>

³ Hwang, K. (2016). Cost-benefit analysis: its usage and critiques. *Journal of Public Affairs*, 16(1), 75-80.

⁴ Nomis (2020). *Official Labour Market Statistics* <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157086/report.aspx#>

⁵ Ministry of Justice (2021). *Mortgage and Landlord Possession Statistics* <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/mortgage-and-landlord-possession-statistics>

⁶ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2021). *Live tables on homelessness* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

the proportion of individuals seeking support from HtC that have dependent children, according to project demographic data (29% for years 1-3; 34% for years 4-5).

Other assumptions are as follows, the figure of 94 for employment support in HtC project data was used as a measure of the target population that the project was able to engage with (i.e., 0.64% of the 14,170 people in Salford claiming out-of-work benefits), with a retention rate of 50% (i.e., the proportion of those who complete the recommended actions), and an impact of 10% due to the difficulties associated with helping people re-enter paid work⁷.

We estimated that the HtC project was able to engage with 25% of those at risk of eviction and 12% of statutory homeless households in Salford, based upon the 858 instances of housing related support over the last five years. Again, a retention rate of 50% was assumed, but with a higher impact rate of 50%, due to the steps that can be taken to help people avoid eviction, such as negotiating with landlords, and applications for financial support⁸. We again estimated that 50% of individuals engaging with the project completed the recommended actions, and that this was effective in improving well-being through positive functioning (autonomy, control, aspirations) in 50% of cases for both individuals and families.

We used a number of safeguards against over claiming the project value, including optimism bias correction (i.e., accounting for the level of confidence in the data). In this analysis this ranged between 0 and -40%. Drop-off and lag were also accounted for. Lag denotes to the time needed for changes to impact the target population, while drop-off refers to the way in which some participants tend to revert back to pre-intervention status over time. In this case, a drop-off rate of 10% was applied to each of the benefits and a lag of 10% for improved individual and family well-being, due to the time needed for the changes to have an impact. Finally, the deadweight was taken into consideration. This is also known as 'business as usual' or the extent of change which would have taken place without the intervention. In the present analysis, deadweight of 3-5% was applied to each of the benefits.

Budget actuals were obtained from the project management team in order to gain an accurate understanding of costs. However, due to the very function of Salford Citizen's Advice/HtC, which includes helping people achieve financial gains through benefits advice and guidance on how to access other sources of support, there are additional costs to the public sector, which needed to be factored into the analysis. Here we included financial gains relating to

⁷ Damm, C. (2012). The Third Sector Delivering Employment Services: An Evidence Review.

⁸ Fitzpatrick, S., & Pawson, H. (2016). Fifty Years since Cathy Come Home: Critical Reflections on the UK Homelessness Safety Net. *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 16(4), 543-555.

applications to government schemes for financial help/energy efficiency; along with Benefit/Tax Credit gains including new awards or increases; award or increase following revision or appeal action; and action taken to mitigate the Benefit Cap or Under Occupation. Together, these totalled £1,236,541 over the five years. It is important to note, however, that many of the project costs would have to be met elsewhere, for example, through Foodbanks, charity, and other voluntary and community sector organisations. As such, we estimated that ultimately, 80% of these costs would have otherwise been met elsewhere. Finally, in case this was an overly optimistic estimation, we applied optimism bias correction at 40%.

Thus, using these data, the assumptions outlined, and the Unit Cost Database, the financial and economic value of the project was calculated over a five-year timeframe. Even after taking all of the steps outlined above, it is important to interpret the results with caution. The values refer to notional savings or value created, rather than actual cash accrued. Moreover, it is not an exact science. Rather, it is based on estimates and the values in the Unit Cost Database and is subject to the same limitations as its constituent parts.

The table below presents the key results for the CBA of the project based on the available data. The financial return on investment is £3.12 for every £1 spent, which suggests that there is a financial benefit to the project. The public value returns on investment is £5.82 for every £1 spent, representing significant benefits in relation to project costs. These figures sit between the highest and lowest returns for the project that we have presented in previous reports, which is to be expected when using a total of the people accessing Salford Citizens Advice services over the last five years.

Table 5. Cost benefit analysis results for the project

Project costs (discounted)	Time frame (years)	Financial value created (net)	Economic value created (net)	Financial return on investment	Public value return on investment
£483,576.00*	5	£687,693.77	£2,182,801.76	£3.12	£5.82

*Includes project financial gains and estimates of offset costs.

6 Meeting the Big Lottery Fund Outcomes

Service Users interviews (n=36)

Outcome 1: People who have experienced hardship crisis are better able to improve their circumstances

The first main theme from Outcome 1 was linked to having previous knowledge about how to contact the SCA. Other 'network' conversations were also held at local services, such as the Foodbank, staff put local people in touch with SCA. One service users said: *'They were there every Friday. So they sorted my bills out and stuff. They gave me a voucher for food parcels. I'd be lost without them'*. Other service users mentioned their initial desperate state and needed access to food. HtC staff offered advice about the Foodbanks, and also the Food Club(s) operated by Emmaus, a social supermarket known as Lucie's Pantry. The supermarket provides a sustainable and affordable source of food and household essentials to members of the Pendleton community struggling to make ends meet.

Interviews with service users indicated that people in crisis did know who to contact initially to help them. They came across SCA through conversations with other homeless people they shared their concerns with. Once service users had made contact with SCA, the HtC project workers were considered to be helpful and encouraged individuals to help themselves. A service user said: *'I didn't know anything like that existed, I've not really used the Citizens Advice before, and it was quite a positive experience. She was kind and helped me come to terms with a lot of things. She explained how to get things done and the right way to do it'*.

A second main theme was the supportive nature of the SCA service(s) in general. All the participants indicated that the HtC team were valued by them at a time of crisis. This was either through the development of relationships and/or being able to advise/advocate how to use other partner agencies, such as the Wood Street Mission – through the provision of school uniforms.

A third main theme was the ability to access support within walking distance from home mitigated the transports costs of getting further afield, but also helped those struggling to cope with going outside. For one, the furthest they had been for advice was approximately seven miles to the SCA in Pendleton at Salford Precinct, but they were glad to find help close to home at Mustard Tree in Little Hulton. He said:

'Yes, it made it a lot more comfortable for me and to access the Citizens Advice as well, rather than coming to a local town centre, which I'd have struggled with at the time'.

All the service users mentioned that locally based SCA services were of real value to them. This also included using other HtC partner agencies, such as Loaves and Fishes in Pendleton, the Mustard Tree in Little Hulton and accessing local Food Banks/Food Clubs based across Salford city. This approach, in effect, supports the notion of shifting reliance upon the HtC project team and connecting local people to support 'hubs'. Support hubs (preferred partners) have evolved over the duration of this project to ensure that an infrastructure continues to exist once the project term is completed.

A fourth main theme emerged via the indicators (1/2) as to how well or otherwise service users understood the existence of the HtC project. As previously mentioned in the Interim Report (July '19) no-one cited the use of the HtC website (<https://www.salfordhelpthroughcrisis.org.uk>) or the linked Twitter site to gain an overview about how HtC can help someone through crisis. This factor could be linked to disadvantage and poverty, in terms of no means to access digital resources such as the internet/smart 'phones etc.

Despite the very positive response, actual knowledge about the distinct character of HtC was fairly limited. Nine service users did not recognise the term at all, and among the rest only a vague awareness appeared to exist. One suggested they had been told something but *'nothing that sticks in my mind'* while another admitted they knew it was something about the funding of SCA but didn't really understand. Three mentioned leaflets, although one did not read it and another could only recall the worker *'did give me something'*. As highlighted, all the service users assumed that the HtC project was part of the generic SCA services and therefore did not recognise it as a separate and distinct project.

Outcome 2: People who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis are better able to plan for the future

The first main theme from Outcome 2 was that some of the service users knew what to do if they ever fell into crisis again. This related to issues such as welfare benefits, debt, health, housing, financial advice, and when needing to access utilities (gas/electric). What was apparent from the interviews was the fact that all the people 'in crisis' were focused upon immediate 'survival' and were not necessarily thinking about being able to plan for the future. The data revealed that all the service users were very grateful for the intense support they received from SCA and knew how to contact them again, or at least, visit the local foodbank 'hub' to get help and assistance.

Earlier in the project's existence (2017-2019) the interviews revealed at that stage that the HtC project helped local citizens who experienced hardship and/or crisis to improve their circumstances and plan for the future. Service users described intensive, multi-layered help, which exceeded their expectations and often represented a major improvement on past support. This commitment had a positive impact upon the initial indicators set by SCA. For example, it enabled local citizens to access drop-in sessions at various partner agencies (different locations) which were particularly valued. Overall, it was clear that service users in crisis were better informed ('show me how') to improve their circumstances and manage their welfare benefits, debt, housing and health, and social care problems as a result of accessing SCA.

By way of example, a case study is presented by one service user. She explained that she received help from the SCA whilst visiting the Emmaus 'hub'. She needed a washing machine and an HtC project worker advised her how to arrange this, (grant application) which she did. This citizen was encouraged to plan for herself and her family's needs. She further explained that she had contacted SCA previously, about part-time contract work finishing. This was related to claiming welfare benefits and making decisions as to whether she would undertake contract work in the future. Her comments were: *'I asked for advice and whether I would be better off on benefits. Being at work became difficult with five children. Trying to juggle everything, it was just crazy'*.

A second theme was that all the service users confirmed they would recommend HtC to others and gave a very positive impression about the service. In terms of progress since July '19 what was more apparent is the coordinated approach (known as 'hubs') between some partner agencies, to respond more quickly to those individuals who need services. All the service users mentioned the importance of provision of school uniforms (Wood Street Mission) and also linked services such as Emmaus and local Foodbanks. The cited examples (and indicator) suggest that the HtC team has been successful with regard to helping people to improve their ability to plan for the future.

Outcome 3: Partner Agencies are better able to support people effectively tackle hardship due to sharing learning and evidence

Interviews were completed with HtC partner agencies to gain an insight into the operational aspect of working together as well as the outcomes for their respective organisation. Various elements were included in order to assess the robustness of the partnership as a whole: (1) The extent to which partners have developed *new* relationships across the collective, or expanded existing ones and how substantial those links have become as a result of HtC; (2) Evaluating the relative strengths and weaknesses across the group, the respective contributions of partners, how challenges are managed and where the skills of one are boosting the performance of another are all important indicators of the health of the partnership; (3) Understanding the level of overall co-ordination across HtC, the progress of



initiatives about shared learning, evidence and the added strategic value about the 'advice and guidance sector' in Salford is key:

- Development of new relationships & expansion of existing relationships
- Evaluation of the relative strengths and weaknesses across the group
- Levels of overall co-ordination across HtC & progress of initiatives to promote shared learning

Development of new relationships & expansion of existing relationships

At the mid-way point of the HtC project (2018-2019) interviews were undertaken with the project staff, assigned to the HtC project. One interview was completed face-to-face and two interviews were completed through written feedback (see Appendix C). The feedback was an important aspect of the HtC project, in terms of gaining in-depth insights about the operational delivery over time, monitoring any changes to the project's original intentions, the evolving relationships between service users and not least, further progress and engagement with partner agencies. The project workers had a close connection to this project and had therefore invested resources and commitment to enable service users to lead (crisis free) independent lifestyles. This was based upon the premise of offering help/support which encouraged and enhanced self-reliance/self-development and thereby reduces crisis situations occurring within their lives.

Project Worker (A) - conferred that some partner agencies have provided support in addition to the HtC project workers, but a robust coherent service was missing and partner agencies were still working in silos to some extent. Partners prioritise their original remit (to be expected) and may extend their services to individuals who have additional needs (e.g. signpost to health services).

Project Worker (B) – discussed the progress that has been made in terms of connections with partner agencies. The impetus for this has been the change in the political climate, in the sense that austerity (cuts in services) has had an impact upon the provision of support to vulnerable adults, in need of a plethora of services.

Project Worker (C) – conferred that there had been a general growth of the HtC project over the past year (2018). This was measured by the increased number of multiple drop-in sessions which covered five days per week placed in different areas across the city. This has been a significant improvement of provision for those citizens who were in crisis and presented complex issues to be dealt with. The most important aspect of support was through

the advice about welfare benefits, which in turn helped to break the cycle of crisis in someone's life. The agency Gingerbread was also mentioned, in terms of being able to support lone parents in terms of practical and emotional support through the provision of friendship groups, advocacy work and other services.

Evaluation of the relative strengths and weaknesses across the group

A relative strength which emerged since the existence of the HtC project has been the engagement with local 'community activists'. Due to the serious effects of the austerity climate which has increased the levels of deprivation across the city, project workers had identified gaps in provision(s) of services. The value-added presence of a community activist (based within local housing estates) has encouraged citizens, including single parent families to come forward and ask for help. HtC staff also developed good communication links with Revive, the immigration partner agency. This is related to the Home Office and ensuring that homeless people are receiving the correct advice about length of stay and also information about accommodation/welfare benefits.

There has been significant developments and engagement with local citizens which was considered a breakthrough. This is based upon cultural norms within specific areas across the city, given the fact that both individuals and families had traditionally been reluctant to engage, due to some individuals having '*an insular mentality about self-protection*' i.e. not wanting outsiders '*to interfere*' about hardship that people faced on a daily basis.

As mentioned in the interim report (July, 2018) the connections between HtC staff and partner agencies can, in effect, promote a better experience and outcome(s) for the individual/family, due to complex cases being dealt with more efficiently. This factor is underpinned by the existence of 'partner networks' and in particular, HtC staff working towards a preventative strategy of provision.

The network(s) and infrastructure between different partners exists but needed to become more robust in the future, in order to keep up the momentum of support to people experiencing hardship/crisis. Some charities across the city were attempting to raise their profiles – some of whom provided education through skills enhancement and others provided goods, such as food, furniture etc. There is a necessity to encourage some partners to become more independent (from HtC project workers) when providing and/or sign posting individuals/families to appropriate services.

Levels of overall co-ordination across HtC & progress of initiatives to promote shared learning

One of the most significant initiatives (and strategic value) which has developed is the enhanced co-ordination of services between the Health Improvement Teams (HITs) and linked partner agencies. The HITs are based across the city. One Senior Community Worker (SCW) explained that local people often needed advice, help and guidance which necessitated working in partnership with other agencies, one of which is SCA. As a team, multi-agency group meetings were held regularly to ensure that each designated area (of poverty) had a community worker attached to it. Group members consisted of housing, employment, local NHS Trusts and SCA. The forum encourages an ethos of networking and sharing relevant information about local areas. The focus is to support those individuals/families that require additional support due to hardship and/or experiencing a crisis. She also commented about why people experienced hardship and said: *'poorly paid jobs, part-time work, zero hours contracts. People just don't have enough money to live on. They don't have access to computers and the skills required to complete a form on-line'*.

Due to the fact that she is an established SCW introducing a new service/people (HtC) had taken time to establish. She discussed the importance of trust, especially when focused upon poverty issues. Once a familiar face (from the HtC project) was visiting the community regularly, this enabled local people to come forward and share their personal issues with an HtC project worker. She commented: *'I think the old community work thing of just sitting around and being available is important, after a while people start to accept you'*. She confirmed that the school uniform project had worked very well. This included collaboration between professionals working together (SCW, some schools, SCA and Wood St. Mission) to enable families to benefit from this initiative. She also mentioned her input with the Together@44 Group which is a group of parents who have disabled children. She introduced the notion that the presence of an HtC project worker could assist (or signpost to other professionals) with issues they experienced, such as the paucity of respite services and/or difficulties claiming benefits. She discussed the impact of the HtC project in terms of *'knowing they are there'* for support, although she realised that a robust infra-structure was also important, once the project ends in 2021.

Shared Learning with local schools

One participant, (a registered Social Worker) was based across two reception/infant/junior schools (500 children in total). She explained that her post was originally a secondment from the Child Protection Team in Salford for three years. However, due to the increased demand for welfare, child in need/protection services within the school and local area, the post was

made permanent in 2017. She is part of the pastoral team and attends collective team meetings between pastoral team members and teaching colleagues. This collaborative approach enables professionals to share information, raise any concerns, plan future interventions and refer onto other professionals if required. This may or may not include local voluntary agencies such as the SCA. She mentioned the 'benefit culture'. By this she meant that some families are better off through claiming welfare benefits, although some individuals wish to be in paid work. She said: *'it can be a struggle for lots of our families, but some do manage on a very limited budget'*. She further explained that although she is school based, she will undertake home visits if necessary. However, she mentioned the fact that: *'there is still a stigma about a social worker visiting someone at home'*. Home visits are undertaken when concerns have been raised about child/children, and potential safeguarding issues are present in some form. She commented about the use of SCA (not necessarily HtC) and made referrals to SCA when needed – in terms of specific advice about benefits, in the main. She appreciated the service SCA provided on a regular basis and shared this resource with teaching colleagues, who could also recommend SCA to families. She appreciated the visit from an HtC project worker who explained about HtC and its aim to build local partnerships between schools to help alleviate poverty. Although, she commented: *'it can be difficult with people's schedules and challenges which may occur in school at any time'*. *But just having the opportunity to share information and to know which agencies are out there, is a great help to us'*.

Outcome 4: Those experiencing, or who are at high risk of experiencing, hardship crisis, have a stronger, more collective voice to better shape a response to their issues

This outcome was more difficult to evaluate. This, in part, was to do with the limitations and sample numbers (n=36) of service users who were interviewed. Whilst all the service users mentioned the value of the HtC service and 'hubs' what became apparent from the interviews was that the level(s) of self-confidence, underpinned by knowledge about the 'advice and guidance' sector varied between individuals. This, in turn, affected how individuals were able to develop a 'collective voice' about wider 'system changes' (e.g. reducing waiting lists for services) and/or the lack of support for those who had on-going mental health issues – impacted by poverty issues. The main theme to emerge from the majority of participants was the necessity to meet their immediate needs i.e. prevention of a crisis situation. This factor had a bearing upon the capacity of individuals to focus upon wider 'system' changes – such as the lack of support for those who had complex issues to be addressed from a variety of services and agencies.

However, since September 2018 a new group had evolved known as the Client Council, located at a partner agency. Members met at the agency every two weeks. One HtC project worker had an advisory role about potential new projects. A member of the evaluation team (JL) attended one meeting and also interviewed members (n=3) on 12 February 2019. Members of the Client Council confirmed that they were grateful that this forum existed. It meant they could discuss issues which were important to them and share their 'collective voice' with the project worker and support workers based at the agency. They all confirmed the existence of the Client Council enabled them to:

'Develop friendships which are not available to them on a daily basis, as people come and go which makes it difficult to get to know people better'.

Members said they felt comfortable and could ask for help from staff if they needed it. During the Client Council meeting they discussed issues such as, the quality of the meals offered, local visits, music lessons and personal care such as the provision of haircuts from a local college for homeless people. They also enjoyed sharing their views during the evaluation of the HtC project.

As mentioned earlier, a productive approach involves engagement and advocacy from a 'grass routes' perspective (HITs). This can help to build social capital (community activists) within local communities to enhance opportunities for continued self-advancement and service users learning (from trusted colleagues) how to respond to their issues. It is also important to acknowledge (and not assume) that those people who are at high risk of experiencing hardship crisis may not wish to be part of a 'collective' as there are numerous (individualised) factors which affect people in different ways.

7 CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusion

The final evaluation has provided evidence (and plausible accounts) that service users who have utilised the HtC project per se and additional 'hub' services have been able to improve their immediate circumstances. Interactions between local citizens and the project workers have demonstrated that people responded in positive ways. For example, they felt at ease and able to explain their personal circumstances. One person applied for a white goods grant, which also enabled her to continue supporting her family. The important factor has been the growth of the 'hubs' (Emmaus) accentuated through the onset of the global pandemic (COVID-19). This localised development and connections between agencies has made access to provision much easier for those individuals experiencing hardship to benefit. To a certain extent the creation of a 'one-stop-shop' approach has facilitated practical help (foodbanks) advice (HtC) and support (Wood St. Mission). However, most of the service users did not actually state that they felt better able to plan for the future. This would indicate that the participants (depending upon circumstances) are likely to return to a pre-intervention status. Albeit better informed (and perhaps more resilient) about where to access support, should a crisis situation re-occur in the future.

The partner agencies responded in accordance with their individual roles and subsequent agency remit. Each agency commented about specific elements about the HtC project and how project workers had intervened on behalf of individuals and local communities. For example, the community worker (local Salford estate) required on-going funds for room hire and to facilitate the distribution of free school uniforms. Another agency focused upon local community engagement and the presence of an HtC project worker offering advice and guidance about welfare benefits and other services. Local people were encouraged to 'help themselves' having acquired information about how to access either a service or provisions (energy companies/foodbanks). A local voluntary agency (Loaves & Fishes) felt more confident about the infra-structure which now existed between some agencies (Emmaus, foodbanks, Wood St. Mission, Revive and HtC). This made a positive difference to their approach, especially when dealing with complex multi-layered issues often presented to them by those individuals in a crisis situation.

There are challenges associated with the engagement of service users when a more collective 'grass roots voice' is desired, in order to influence access to organisations and vital services. One of the main challenges is the assumption that those who have experienced hardship through poverty, wish to engage with organisations and/or 'systems' to effect change. The participants were more concerned about their personal/family welfare rather than trying to influence changes. This point is emphasised by the increased number of people seeking support with housing related issues (risks of eviction), as indicated through the cost benefit analysis.

7.2 Recommendations

The overall recommendation in moving forward is the continuation of support to individuals (and/or groups) through the 'hubs'. This is likely to enhance a community presence which may influence positive changes in the future. In addition, build upon the exit strategy (robust networks) already in place, once the project finishes in 2021. The HtC project workers mentioned last year (2019-20) that they wished to reduce the reliance upon them from both individuals and agencies, when faced with potential crisis situations. To date, the team has worked hard to create an environment of 'empowerment and advocacy' with individuals/families. This approach is enhanced through effective connections between agencies whose primary aim is to support those in hardship crisis situations.

An important secondary recommendation is to build upon the embryonic contacts with local schools across the city. Schools are an influential lynchpin of community activities and have on-going contact with children, parents and a myriad of allied professionals. Whilst it was possible to interview one school representative, the data revealed that the primary focus (and knowledge base) was aligned to seeking welfare benefit advice. There was limited recognition about the variety of 'hub' links in the locality and therefore knowledge, about how additional voluntary agencies can be of benefit to those families who are indeed in hardship crisis.

APPENDIX A: TOPIC GUIDE – SERVICE USERS/CITIZENS (LIVED EXPERIENCE)

Topic Guide: PROJECT BENEFICIARIES (Service Users)

A. INTRODUCTION

- This interview should take about 30 minutes.
- Explain who we are and what we are doing.
- Outline and emphasise informed consent and anonymity.
- Explain audio recording and check if it is OK to record for transcription purposes
- Outline the purpose of the interview – explain that the main objective is to explore their experience of receiving services from Salford HtC and whether it has made any difference to their personal circumstances. As part of this we would like to ask if relevant if they have approached other support services offering advice and guidance on hardship, debt, managing income etc.
- Briefly outline standard etiquette - e.g. Speak clearly and personal criticisms or abusive language.
- Remember **THERE ARE NO RIGHT AND WRONG ANSWERS** - we are here to capture people's views, whether positive, negative or neutral.

Section A: previous interactions (for those to whom it applies)

In order to understand the impact of changes brought about through the Project, we would also explore any previous interaction with other hardship services.

- To help us get a baseline, can tell me about any interactions in the past you have had with other services before this?
- Would you describe those past experiences as positive and negative – or a mix of both?
- Did they lead to successful outcomes (i.e. debt reduction)?
- On those occasions did you receive a combination of support from multiple organisations (e.g. community groups, charities etc.) or just one?

Experience of support provided by the Salford HtC

Areas for discussion

I would now like to turn to your contact with Salford HtC.

- Can you tell me a little about the particular experience of hardship crisis which brought you into contact with Salford HtC?
- Can you describe the type(s) of support provided by the Salford HtC?
- Has the support helped them to improve their circumstances? Have you had more positive outcomes this time than before (if applicable)?
- Would you describe the support you received this time as better/worse/the same than previous episodes (if applicable)?
- If better, to what extent do you feel more equipped to plan for the future than previous occasions?
- To what extent do you feel that this is down to a new way of working on the part of staff?
- Did any staff explain that they are involved in a new way of supporting that seeking hardship support in Salford?
- Have you ever been given or seen any information/publicity about Salford HtC? If so by whom?
- Their thoughts on the strength of their collective voice
- Do you currently access other support elsewhere for the same issues? If so, can you briefly describe where and what it consists of? Did this come about through signposting by Salford HtC?
- Would you recommend Salford HtC?

1. *Future Learning*

I would now like to ask your views on any areas where you think the agencies involved in Salford HtC could improve.

- Are there any ways the support could be improved?
- Finally, is there anything we haven't covered that you would like to raise before we close the interview?

Thank you for your time. End interview. Stop recording and ensure all consent forms have been obtained.

APPENDIX B: TOPIC GUIDE - PARTNER AGENCIES

Topic Guide: PARTNER AGENCIES

Please note: this topic guide can be used for focus groups, but also one to one interviews if required.

A. INTRODUCTION

- The main objective is documenting and evaluating the implementation and impact of the Project staff, service users and participating partner agencies and what lessons can be learnt. This will explore your perceptions around three key areas: the project's processes, its impact and learning for the future.
- Remember **THERE ARE NO RIGHT AND WRONG ANSWERS** - we are here to capture all participants' views. We do not expect people to speculate but simply talk from their own experience and knowledge.

1. *Introduction*

- Can I start by asking you about your role and how long you have currently working for your respective organisation?
- How does your role link into the Salford Crisis Support project?
- What are your perceptions about the causes of hardship crisis in Salford?

2. *Reflections on the process*

Areas for discussion include a) General perspectives on the purpose and nature of the project b) how support has been delivered in practice c) are there any gaps in the services provided? d) the extent to which working is collaborative.

- How did you first hear about the Salford Crisis Support project?
- What did you understand was the rationale for this approach?
- Were there any preliminary challenges in adjusting to this way of working?
- How has the delivery (of HTC) operated in practice? Is it different to before? This can include practical or admin aspects such as reporting, location of working, how service users are dealt with etc.
- In your opinion are there any clear gaps in the delivery?

- Has partnership working with community organisations changed from previously? If so how?

3. *Reflections on impact*

In order to understand the impact of changes brought about through the operation of Salford Crisis Support, we would like to explore your perspectives about the difference it has made. Areas for discussion include a) project activities that they found most effective at addressing hardship/recurrence b) Project activities that have helped to improve collective voice.

- What project activities have they found most effective at addressing hardship/recurrence of hardship?

To the best of your knowledge has Salford Crisis Support project resulted in:

- Stronger relationships between community groups working in the area?
- A better collective voice among organisations?
- Greater empathy among staff in other organisations (esp. mainstream ones) of the challenges facing people in crisis?
- Has involvement in the project made any difference to the way they deliver their service? (e.g. less 'fire-fighting', later intervention, different types of support needed)
- Has involvement in the project made any difference to your effectiveness in supporting service users? If so how?
- What impact if any has it had on outcomes (work and benefits) for service users improved? To what extent do you feel that this is down to involvement in Salford Crisis Support?

4. *Learning from the project*

Areas for discussion

- To what extent has collaborative working been successful? If not why not?
- How might the project be improved?
- Finally is there anything we haven't covered that you would like to raise before we close the focus group?

Thank you for your time. End interview.

APPENDIX C: TOPIC GUIDE – PROJECT WORKERS

Salford Citizens Advice: Help through Crisis (HtC)

Interview Guide for HtC project staff

This evaluation is an important opportunity for staff to give their views about the delivery of the HtC project. We want to learn from your experiences and reflections. Please add your comments to the series of questions posed.

Reflections on Process

- How did the implementation of the project evolve
- Were there any preliminary challenges in adjusting to a different way of working
- How has the delivery operated in practice (locations, accessibility with service users/those with lived experience)
- How has partnership working with community organisations progressed
- In your opinion, are there any gaps in the delivery of the HtC project

Reflections on Impact

- Has the project made any difference to your interactions with service users
- Have you noticed any differences in outcomes for service users
- Can you give any examples, which can be used as case studies
- Have you adapted the way in which you work with other community organisations
- Were there any specific activities which made a real difference to service users/organisations

Learning from the HtC project

- In your opinion are there any gaps in provision to date (December 2018)
- How might the project be improved
- Would you support the involvement of community organisations with other services (outside Salford city) who support service users in hardship/crisis
- Can you give examples, which can be used as case studies
- Add any final comments you would like to make about the HtC project