



A review of the Multi-agency Resolution Group (MaRG)

Undertaken as part of the Stoke-on-Trent Changing Futures evaluation



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Executive summary

Background

The Multi-agency Resolution Group (MaRG) originated through the City Council's cooperative working initiative, developed through VOICES, and now operates as a central component of Changing Futures Stoke-on-Trent. Comprising a range of statutory and voluntary sector organisations, the MaRG aims to overcome issues that have caused people with multiple disadvantage to become 'stuck' in the system. It attempts to broker flexible solutions for complex cases, to manage and share risk across relevant agencies by promoting flexibility and a coordinated response.

Aim

To evaluate the current MaRG (within Changing Futures Stoke-on-Trent), this review focused on elements specific to the current model of MaRG: the role of the Independent Chair, customer representation and lived experience involvement, and sustainability of the programme beyond Changing Futures.

Methods

The evaluation involved collating and reviewing anonymised material on cases considered by the MaRG, and interviews with members of the MaRG and other professionals.

Main findings and recommendations

The MaRG was well-regarded, described as a collaborative, solution-focused group led by the Independent Chair. It allows for a collective package of support to be developed that, through the involvement of other partners, shares the 'risk' and presents opportunities that would not otherwise be available for cases regarded as 'high risk'. Based on the main findings, a series of recommendations are proposed, including:

1. **Continuity beyond Changing Futures.** There was consensus that demand for the MaRG will remain/increase and that the group should continue beyond Changing Futures (after March 2025).
2. **Independent Chair.** The Independent Chair role should continue. The role was considered critical in reminding partners of the collaborative approach, the need to work differently, remain solution-focused, and hold partners accountable from a neutral position (i.e., no perceived loyalties/obligations to specific organisations).

3. **Meeting format.** MaRG members should discuss and agree the preferred frequency, duration, and location for (face-to-face) meetings to ensure that all partners can share their thoughts and buy-in to the optimal model.
4. **Lived experience.** Keep lived experience voices on the MaRG panel, with cost implications beyond Changing Futures.
5. **Partner contributions/expectations.** Partners are urged to take collective responsibility. Practical steps to foster this include clarifying the Terms of Reference and an induction discussion for those joining the MaRG (e.g., member expectations, organisational redlines to consider), possibly with a short video to explain, and further discussions/workshops (planned) to address barriers and promote buy-in.
6. **MaRG case co-ordinator.** A case co-ordinator dedicated to the MaRG (part-time) would provide more capacity to follow up actions agreed at MaRG meetings, help to address barriers and be proactive in identifying solutions ahead of the MaRG meeting.
7. **Personal Budget allocation.** Make funds available to the MaRG to support providers to take a risk (e.g., to cover costs related to accommodation).
8. **Future costs, funder and host.** Consider the future cost and funding models for the MaRG beyond Changing Futures. The estimated annual cost for a future model is over £40,000 (including Independent Chair £12,000; part-time case co-ordinator £22,000; Personal Budget £6,000 based on £200 per customer, 30 customers per year; potential cost of future lived experience representation). Uncertainty around who would host should be resolved.
9. **Wider systems change following the MaRG approach.** There is a need to consider replicating the collaborative, flexible MaRG working model across system partners to address problems across the system (within which the MaRG operates).
10. **Accommodation.** The work of the MaRG confirms the wider system issue of insufficient accommodation for people experiencing multiple disadvantage.
11. **Data sharing.** Explore how the Changing Futures central database (CRM; currently Liquid Logic) could support the MaRG.

1. Introduction

This research was carried out as part of the wider evaluation of Changing Futures in Stoke-on-Trent that is being conducted by the Centre for Health and Development (CHAD) at Staffordshire University.

Changing Futures is the local implementation of a national programme to support people experiencing multiple disadvantage (i.e., adults experiencing three or more of the following: homelessness, substance misuse, mental health issues, domestic abuse, and contact with the criminal justice system). Ultimately, the programme aims to improve outcomes for 'the most excluded adults' that are experiencing multiple disadvantage and may be placing a high demand on local response services, but for whom current systems of support are not working.¹

The local partnership is one of 15 areas in England awarded funding (from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and The National Lottery Community Fund) under the three-year, national programme to deliver improvements at the individual, service and system level. In Stoke-on-Trent, the Changing Futures programme builds upon learning from VOICES which was the previous, eight-year (2014-2022) National Lottery-funded partnership programme.²

A core part of the Changing Futures programme is the Multi-agency Resolution Group, a.k.a., The MaRG.³ The MaRG is a group of partner agencies at a senior officer level including Changing Futures, the Police, Rough Sleepers Team, Community Drug and Alcohol Service and the city council. Its purpose is to support organisations and their practitioners to work through cases involving people with multiple disadvantage that have become 'stuck'. It attempts to develop flexible solutions and share risk across relevant agencies, by promoting flexibility and a coordinated response.

The MaRG originated as a Cooperative Working project⁴ and was developed further during VOICES tenure. In 2021, as part of the VOICES evaluation portfolio, CHAD researchers conducted a small-scale evaluation of the then Multi-agency Resolution Group (MaRG) that identified recommendations for the group as it evolved further and transitioned through to the Changing Futures programme.⁵

¹ [Changing Futures: prospectus - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/67444/Changing_Futures_prospectus.pdf)

² Gidlow et al, Legacy Evaluation: A final summative report of the implementation of fulfilling lives: supporting people experiencing multiple disadvantage in Stoke-on-Trent. Available at: <https://www.chadresearch.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/43302-VOICES-Legacy-Evaluation-Digital-Version.pdf>

³ Spyropoulos, K., and Gidlow, C. (2023) Changing Futures evaluation Time 1 Situational Analysis. Available at: <https://www.chadresearch.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Changing-Futures-SA-Time-report-FINAL.pdf>

⁴ [11479 CW SPA LEAFLET A5.indd \(stoke.gov.uk\)](https://www.stoke.gov.uk/media/11479/CW_SPA_LEAFLET_A5.indd)

⁵ McCormack F., Gidlow C., Spyropoulos K (2021) Multi-agency Resolution Group (MaRG): Evaluation report <https://www.chadresearch.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/MaRG-reportfinal-version.pdf>

2. Aim

This is a review of the current Changing Futures MaRG that aims to evaluate its activity and perceptions of its role and effectiveness. We focused primarily on elements specific to the current model of MaRG (as part of Changing Futures), i.e., the role of the Independent Chair, customer representation and lived experience involvement, and sustainability.

3. Methods

There were two main parts to this study. The CHAD team:

- Collated and reviewed anonymised material on cases that have been to the MaRG, to help understand common 'sticking points', the solutions identified, and review progress against action plans put in place by the MaRG.
- Interviewed members of the MaRG and other professionals to explore perceptions of the role and effectiveness of the MaRG.

To aid our understanding of how the MaRG operates in practice, CHAD researchers also observed two MaRG meetings (over MS Teams) and a Community of Practice (in person). Ethical approval for the study was granted by Staffordshire University's ethics committee.

3.1. Review of anonymised material provided by the MaRG

We reviewed anonymous material provided by the MaRG in October 2023, comprising referral forms (n=14) and minutes of MaRG meetings (n=12, from meetings that took place between July 2022 – August 2023). Changing Futures case managers that support delivery of the MaRG provided the documents and anonymised them before sharing with the CHAD team.

A CHAD researcher processed and collated this information into a spreadsheet to allow us to look at progress of individual cases over time in terms of updates and subsequent actions related to each specific case. This information was reviewed before the interviews took place and was revisited upon completion of the interviews.

3.2. Interviews with members of the MaRG and other professionals

Interviews with 12 professionals involved with the MaRG were conducted by a CHAD researcher. This included people with experience of regularly attending the MaRG meetings, of referring cases to the MaRG (themselves or their wider organisation), and some of those involved in delivery. For example,

those involved included people from, Changing Futures, policing, accommodation providers, and social work.

Interviews were semi-structured and explored perceptions of customer representation at the MaRG, the role of the Independent Chair, and sustainability. Questions were also asked about progress against the action plans developed at the MaRG meeting (i.e., facilitators and barriers of progress), and potential areas for improvement.

All interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams and lasted between 16 and 42 minutes (average duration was 34 minutes). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Informed consent was gained from participants before the interview.

Recruitment

Invitations, including the Participant Information Sheet, were emailed out to all members of the MaRG by the Independent Chair. The invitation asked for anyone interested in taking part or in finding out to contact the CHAD team directly. One participant was also recruited via snowball sampling through another participant from the same organisation.

All interviews took place between October and December 2023.

Data analysis

In keeping with the focus on the MaRG during Changing Futures, analysis initially focused on the categories of:

- Customer representation
- Role of the Independent Chair
- Sustainability.

Influenced by phenomenography, throughout the analysis process, we sought to be aware of different perspectives within the data. The intention here was to feed into the wider evaluation of the Changing Futures programme.

With those initial three categories in mind, all transcripts were reviewed and coded by members of the CHAD team who then met to discuss initial observations from the transcripts. All information for each of the three categories was then collated to allow for further exploration of the categories and the various perspectives contained within them. At this point, an 'other' category was created to collate extracts that had been coded but did not fit primarily into the initial three categories.

During the analysis process, we also presented preliminary findings to the steering group for the evaluation for feedback which helped to refine and contextualise the findings and to further shape the recommendations.

4. Findings

4.1. Collated anonymised MaRG material

4.1.1. Customer representation

Across 14 customers for whom referral forms were provided, there were three versions of the form. This introduced some inconsistencies regarding whether referrers were asked to confirm that customers 'were aware' of their referral to MaRG, or to confirm that 'informed consent' for sharing customers' data had been obtained and to provide information on 'client views'.

There were differences in the extent of customer engagement reflected in referral forms.

- 5 out of 14 forms indicated that customers were **not** aware of their MaRG referral

These referrals came from the Police (n=2), Social care (n=1), Housing (n=1) and the City Council Learning Disability team (n=1). The lack of engagement with the customers appeared to relate to a perceived urgency regarding the individuals' circumstance (e.g., arson, monkey dust and potential for violence; extreme vulnerability) or failure to make contact with the customer in time.

- 9 out 14 forms indicated that customers **were** aware of their MaRG referral

Even when customers were aware of their referral, in only two cases were further details provided: one from Changing Futures and one from Adult Social Care. These listed customer preferences and wishes regarding the type of support needed (e.g., accommodation, changes to medication) and outcomes that customers wished to achieve (e.g., abstinence, freedom from abusive relationship, being able to see their children).

The remaining seven forms gave no customer-generated information or 'client views'. In all cases, urgency was evident, e.g., extremely poor health, or implicated arson that might require the MaRG to circumvent usual barriers to support. One customer had 'declined to comment' and for others, the information provided suggested that customers could lack the capacity to engage in the process because of current mental capacity or stability to engage (although not explicitly cited by the referrer).

4.1.2. Identified need and follow-up

Of the 14 customers, the most identified needs related to accommodation (n=9), mental health support (n=7) or support with substance abuse (n=4).

Minutes from the MaRG meetings reflected updates for all 14 customers, confirming that once considered by MaRG, progress against agreed actions were reviewed.

For 10 customers, updates included follow-up actions in response to the review of customer cases. Referral forms did not include the referral date, preventing an examination of the speed within which some cases were reconsidered with resulting actions. However, it appeared common for customers to be discussed at two-three consecutive MaRG meetings, demonstrating ongoing monitoring of situations once necessary actions have been identified.

Again, the need relating to accommodation was dominant, appearing in the actions for eight cases. The circumstances and needs varied (e.g., no accommodation offers, customer evicted due to behaviour, refused accommodation), but speaks to the basic need for appropriate accommodation not being met. Other updates and actions covered the range of complex needs relating to poor mental and physical, substance issues, behaviour and safeguarding/vulnerability.

4.2. Interviews with MaRG professionals

4.2.1. A collaborative space led by the Independent Chair

Overall participants talked about a range of benefits that the MaRG fulfils within the system of support for people experiencing multiple disadvantage locally (which echoes the previous MaRG evaluation from 2021). It was described positively as “*a real collaboration*” (P01), “*a collective and collaborative approach*” (P05) and as presenting the opportunity to be “*more effective and more efficient*” (P12) by working together.

“it’s opened up a lot of eyes to the power of partnership and collaborative working. I think it’s setting a good precedent for how these organisations should work together”
(P10)

As will be discussed, the role of the Independent Chair was considered crucial in setting the tone of the group as collaborative and solution-focused, reviewing actions and fostering accountability over progress against the action plans developed during the MaRG meetings. The role of the Changing Futures case managers was also vital in working with the chair, and “*pulling things together and co-ordinating that support*” (P01). The sense of shared risk that accompanied this collaborative approach was a key strength of the MaRG, perceived as benefiting both professionals and customers. Other benefits (e.g., around the communication between professionals and practical benefits) are also discussed below.

Role of the Independent Chair

Participants felt the Independent Chair was instrumental in setting **the tone of the MaRG meetings as professional and collaborative**, and as a space where all the members' contributions are sought and valued.

“having someone who is outside of, independent of any particular provider means that you lost that sense of it being a competitive space. And it's a collaborative space instead of being a competitive space, which is really important” (P10)

The independence of the role was perceived as “essential” (P07) and meant that they could focus on holding partners to account with “no ulterior motive” (P02) or conflict of interest. It was highlighted this could be difficult, and perhaps would be less well received from someone who was not independent. It also meant that they were well placed to give assurances around risk sharing and accountability, to encourage partners to work together to find alternative solutions.

“We're asking you to do something unusual for your organisation. But [Independent Chair] is here to ensure that other people are going to play their part to make sure that we've got, we've reduced the risk to you in taking that sort of unusual or different approach”. (P05)

The independence was framed as crucial in allowing the chair to hold partners to account and seek assurances that people are doing what they said they would.

“[the chair's] not working for any agency where there's any conflict of interest or you know, he's not benefitting in any way, or the agency he is working for is not benefitting in way, it is totally working in the best interest of the customer” (P02)

This could also involve challenging partners, if necessary, based on need rather than any allegiances:

“[Independent Chair] is very challenging at times when he needs to be, and he does step up and he challenges. He reminds people why we're there” (P08)

Thus, during the meeting the role of the chair is also to maintain the focus on moving the discussion towards solutions:

“[Independent Chair has] no personal or direct professional bias or influence, so you can actually do what you're supposed to do, which is network and link the meeting together, make it flow and make sure it's a productive situation” (P12)

The related practical benefit of having an Independent Chair rather than someone from a partner agency performing the role (as previously) is that partners can focus properly on contributing to the discussion without needing to also chair at the same time and take notes.

Participants also perceived it as useful that the current chair has relevant knowledge, “networks and connections” (P08) from their previous professional role. It was considered beneficial to the MaRG that the Independent Chair “*understands the subject matter*” (P12).

It was highlighted that the Independent Chair is able to escalate issues up an organisation/hierarchy if needed and to **challenge partners outside of the MaRG meetings**, for example by writing to organisations or by picking up the phone to senior members of organisations:

“[Independent Chair]’s got that impartiality to some extent, and objectiveness...credibility” (P12)

It was highlighted that because the Independent Chair’s lack of affiliation to a particular agency “*cuts out any prejudgements or biases*” (P06) that could otherwise emerge regarding specific individuals. This was valued by most participants, although one felt that having more specific, detailed knowledge of customers and services available could allow the chair to have a more proactive role in identifying solutions.

Benefits of ‘shared risk’ for the referrer and customer

A perceived core strength of the MaRG was sharing and mitigating of risk through partners working together, “*that collective risk taking*” (P08), which enabled partners to do something different to their standard procedures/practices. Consequently, this avoided professionals/organisations feeling that they were “*left on their own*” (P05) or expected to shoulder the responsibility for the situation by themselves:

“I think in terms of what we would call care co-ordination, the lead professional – I get the impression that it helps them in terms of they feel that they are directing interventions or leading interventions in a cohesive network as opposed to what happens often, which is where everybody places their expectations on a single professional to solve all the problems.” (P04)

Whilst this was often framed as benefitting the professional/organisation, it was also highlighted as a benefit to the customer at the centre of the case.

“I think if the risk feels like it’s been shared a little bit, then that does the worker good because they are supporting the person, and it all gets funnelled back through the worker doesn’t it” (P09)

As such, the impact that the MaRG can make to customers was described as “*massive*” (P08). It was considered an antidote to risk assessments being negative and risk-based, in advocating for customers and reassuring providers as part of a collective effort:

“Outside of the MaRG, you can’t see any services picking that up and saying ‘oh, we’ll take this person on. But in the MaRG, we’re able to articulate that that person isn’t just the sum of things that have taken previously. So, we’re able to advocate for the person. We’re able to give reassurances to service providers, ‘take this individual on your caseload and we will be there in a heartbeat, we will do everything we can to lift that person whilst they’re in your service’” (P08)”

“For really high need customers, it has opened quite a lot of doors of opportunity to even be assessed for, say, accommodation” (P06)

It was acknowledged that what is being asked of partners can sometimes be uncomfortable because it may be things that do not align with their standard policy and processes and/or that other customers may have been denied. Again, here, the role of the Independent Chair was important in reassuring members that they were part of a collective, facilitating them moving beyond their standard responses.

“it’s like collective risk taking, and it’s not just all on the service who is providing a housing placement. That’s where I think the MaRG works in terms of those outcomes, it’s that people feel a lot more comfortable taking a collective risk than taking all the risk themselves” (P08)

In addition, this speaks to Marmot’s concept of proportionate universalism and the prioritisation of equity rather than equality:

“There’s a small number of people that take up the most time of those agencies. I think, by everybody trying to impact on that together as in the MaRG, that can only benefit services, because you end up with those ones that have the biggest impact getting the biggest support where they need it, and obviously, hopefully, sustainable support as well” (P01)

Benefits of the collective expertise in the MaRG

Participants agreed that there were various benefits to shared knowledge and the “communication network” (P04) through the MaRG. The coming together of a range of professionals enabled members to access insight from other areas (e.g., mental health) that is not readily available to them otherwise, and made referrers more aware of other services/support for people they work with. For example, one participant spoke of finding out more about the work of Expert Citizens CIC and Citizens Advice through the MaRG. In addition, the MaRG was valued for learning from each other and generating new ideas:

“you go to MaRG and you think you’ve thought of everything and then you’ve got all these creative and amazing ideas” (P06)

Fundamentally, drawing on, and benefitting from, the collective expertise of members gave professionals confidence that their decisions and practices were “*more defensible*” (P07).

Participants with experience of referring also emphasised that bringing a case to MaRG was beneficial because relevant partners were present and willing. Outside of the MaRG, “*getting people around a table is almost impossible sometimes*” (P09). Participants reported that to be the case even when a Section 42 of the Care Act (formal adult safeguarding enquiry) is involved, despite that being a legal framework to which organisations should be accountable. This was often framed as resulting from pressures and demands on a stretched system.

Updates on cases also improves accountability and maintains the solution-focused approach

Another core strength of the current MaRG was that actions are reviewed at subsequent meetings, with ongoing updates on cases (as evidenced through reviewing the anonymised MaRG material). This meant that alternative arrangements could be discussed for a case, without a new referral being made, which was perceived as:

‘good in terms of that flexibility and bringing cases back into MaRG if it’s not working. We do have that on the agenda and we’re constantly updating on cases’ (P08)

In keeping with the MaRG ethos though, this was not about a “*blame culture*” (P02) or “*pointing fingers*” (P04) when things had not progressed. The discussion remained solution-focused, about next steps, “*What’s Plan B, what’s next?*” (P06). Thus, the MaRG was described as resilient and cases are revisited as many times as needed because:

“what we thought might work doesn’t for whatever reason, things aren’t working the way that we’ve planned. But again, we will carry on around that loop until we’re able to get to that place” (P05)

Some participants talked about the need to accept that “*recovery is not linear*” (P05) here and it was acknowledged that can sometimes be “*disheartening*” for staff involved (P08). However, generally the MaRG managed to retain its focus as “*a very upbeat and solution-focused forum*” (P06).

Along with the Independent Chair’s role here, the Changing Futures case managers were also vital, and had a key role in communicating with partners. They follow up on updates between meetings, as well as reviewing and prioritising referrals (with the chair), giving feedback to professionals who have made referrals when they were not accepted, sending out referral forms ahead of MaRG meetings and taking the action-focused notes of the meetings.

Participants felt it was important that MaRG retains the mechanism to review cases because circumstances and situations can change for various reasons. Moreover, reviewing progress against the action plans fostered accountability:

“People are sort of held accountable to what they said they would do, which I think is important for the customers... there’s a lot of people feel like they’ve been promised things and then they never get a call back or they never see you again” (P06)

Those with experience of taking a case to the MaRG also found this helpful to gain updates from partners where there had been little progress against the previous actions, with emails that had potentially been missed.

Membership: the ‘right’ people with the ‘right’ mentality vs. push back and wider barriers

Running through the data was the importance of all partners contributing to the collaborative approach of the MaRG. The range of members being at the ‘right level’ to make decisions was considered key:

“there was a good representation of people that can make some of those decisions, not necessarily higher management, but have some autonomy to say, ‘right, we can be flexible and we can do this’” (P01)

To support partner’s abilities to make decisions around solutions at the meeting, referral forms are shared with partners in advance. The expectation is that each comes prepared to give background about their experiences of a particular case and *“to think about as service what we’re going to bring and we’re ready to do”* (P08). Partners found this helpful because it gave them the information needed to do ‘their homework’ with their own colleagues and records:

“it gives you the opportunity to look into your own systems and see what [the service’s] experience of that person is” (P10)

This was crucial in allowing the MaRG discussions to **focus on solutions** and what the different partners might be willing to offer as part of that collective package.

However, there was also frustration that this preparation is not being done by all partners and that the attendance of some partners is inconsistent. For example, there was frustration at the lack of accommodation providers in regular attendance.

“if we’re having a meeting about people who’ve got no accommodation and then there’s no accommodation providers there, it seems a pointless task” (P11)

There was a perception that some partners have *“slacked off”* (P03) which was often coupled with the suggestion to get *“more management level in the group”* (P03) to ensure member had the authority

to commit to action in the meeting. Given the urgency of cases and the solution-focused nature of the MaRG, there was frustration when this was not possible:

“So they’re going off and saying ‘well I have to find that information out, I will have to do this, I will have to get back to you’. And that’s not really what MaRG is about, it needs to be quite spontaneous and impulsive, really to help someone but I’m finding that isn’t happening” (P11)

Ultimately, membership of the MaRG is voluntary. The MaRG (and its chair) has little power and is reliant on partners being willing (and able) to work differently, which *“flexes your system a little bit”* (P05). Some participants raised questions in response to what had been perceived as some “service flexing” by a particular partner at a recent meeting.

“I don’t know what will take place next, but if I was the Independent Chair, I’d be having a conversation outside of [the meeting with particular partner] and just reinforcing a few things” (P08)

Speaking of the same meeting, another felt that there could have been more of a challenge during the meeting itself, to remind the group of the MaRG’s purpose. The role of the Independent Chair involves balancing the relationship between partners and maintaining the tone of the MaRG as professional, collaborative and solution-focused. How they manage and respond to such situations is crucial and may point to the need for other measures to support commitment and action from partners (as discussed later).

Another participant explained that more senior members of an organisation may be more willing to commit to a particular action during the meeting, they too can experience *“push back”* (P07) after the meeting. Often this resulted a reluctance through already being overstretched or reverting to standard organisational policies and procedures (e.g., being sent a standard referral form to complete). Despite the MaRG being about challenging organisations to do things differently, one of the key barriers to action plans progressing remains *“standard policies and procedures”* (P05):

“So although you might sit in the MaRG and say, yes we’ll break down those barriers, and absolutely we’ll do it. In practice it’s not that easy” (P07)

It was emphasised that the ask to ‘flex’ standard processes would never mean doing something outside of the law. Nevertheless, there is fear associated with doing things differently. It was reported that not all partners are flexible when working with Changing Futures (including the MaRG). It was perceived that statutory organisations, in particular, are less inclined to agree to actions that might be perceived of as risks, out of concern for how it might reflect on them later at a later date. To address this, it was suggested that MaRG could implement a contract/agreement for the other agencies (i.e., beyond Changing Futures) to be *“...more formalised in terms of that commitment and that signing up”*

(P02). This could include requirements of compulsory attendance (by the member or appropriate representative), commitment to preparation ahead of the meetings and willingness to be part of the solution.

A contrasting viewpoint was that the MaRG should be more understanding about what different providers can and cannot do (due to their organisational policies and parameters with insurers), i.e., the 'red lines' on which they are unable to flex. An often talked about example was with accommodation providers and their insurance policies which may then come back and say a certain 'flex' is impossible. This was framed as being beyond the parameters of their service, rather than a lack of willingness.

Another critical issue with implications for how the MaRG operates was the lack of capacity in the wider system for 'high risk' cases that tend to be referred:

"it's largely the higher risk customers that are being brought to the MaRG and there simply just isn't the capacity available in services to be able to effectively provide for those individuals, whether it be accommodation or the wraparound support that's needed. So, I think it's the capacity in those sort of high-level services, that's the main barrier really" (P10)

Some participants also explained that, at the time of interview, Changing Futures was at capacity and unable to take on new cases:

"[Changing Futures] have small caseloads, but the throughput isn't that quick, we haven't got that capacity to take on cases like that all the time" (P02)

Excessive demand (vs. capacity) was highlighted in the later interviews, where participants noted that there was even a waiting list for MaRG.

"Unfortunately, at the moment there is a queue. And there's an ever-increasing trend that we will continue to have these cases, we're not able to turn that tap off" (P12)

4.2.2. Customer representation

As discussed below, no customers have attended MaRG meetings. Generally, participants talked about customer representation happening through the referrer who should (in theory) be working with the customer to make the referral, and through the contributions of the 'lived experience' members of the group (Changing Futures staff).

The assumption is that referrers work with customers but customer representation varies

Participants highlighted that on the MaRG referral form, it does ask about the customer's views and wishes. However, as noted earlier, different forms had been used to make MaRG referrals so this varied. The general view was that the customer's views are captured on the referral form and the referrer would represent them during the MaRG discussion. Overall, participants felt that most customers are aware that their case was being discussed at the MaRG and will have provided consent for that to happen.

"Part of the introduction process is that we do ask for whoever's bringing the case to ensure that the individual knows that their case has been introduced to the MaRG"
(P05)

Some highlighted that there may be instances where that is not possible/achieved, but that those cases are not common. Participants emphasised the importance of "working with" (P12) the customer to prepare the referral form:

"that needs to be part of the discussion, so they understand that they are going to be talked about with other professionals and what the purpose of that meeting is designed to do" (P12)

Those with experience of doing referring to MaRG explained how they had worked with the customer to fill in the form, and would keep the customer updated about subsequent progress.

"the customer is definitely aware that it's been taken to the MaRG – that's part of the form [referrers] have to fill in" (P10)

They also talked about explaining to the customer why they wanted to make a referral in the first place, and offering reassurance around that:

"But also the reasons why we're wanting to take it to the MaRG is not because we want to, you know, talk about them and involve everyone, but it's to try and get them some extra support or you know, accommodation options, whatever it might be" (P06)

Those participants described customers being positive about it when framed in that way, although one highlighted that with a particularly complex case that *"It took a bit of negotiating"* (P09).

Ultimately, it was felt that those who know the customer, such as case-coordinators, are well placed to represent them and advocate on their behalf. Most progress was thought to happen when there is a case-co-ordinator able to work with the customer and follow up on actions.

"I think the case co-ordinators, the people who know them best will advocate for them if they're not there themselves" (P07)

However, it was also felt that the extent to which a customer and their views was represented varied and depended on whether the referrer, or indeed another agency, had a good relationship with the customer (as discussed more below).

“Where we can, we would encourage any agencies that have referred, or that are best fit in terms of that relationship with the customer, to have that conversation and absolutely bring [the customer’s] views to the MaRG.” (P02)

It was highlighted that if no one involved in the MaRG already has a relationship with a customer, it can be hard to then go back to update the customer afterwards about the action plan.

“I’d like to think [the customers] are aware of the action plan and what was going ahead. It all depends on a lot of cases” (P11)

Participants felt that because of the purpose of the MaRG and the nature of the cases discussed, it is not uncommon for the customers discussed at MaRG to have little engagement with agencies.

“some of the people brought to MaRG...are the most entrenched, most stuck people in our city” (P03)

“it’s that kind of entrenched...crisis situation” (P02)

As a result, some MaRG referrals have no information from the customer, stating “unable to engage” (P08) on the form (as mentioned earlier, of the 14 referral forms reviewed, 5 indicated the customer was not aware, and of the 9 that were aware of the referral, only 2 provided further details about customers’ wishes). This makes it difficult for the views and wishes of the customer to be taken into consideration during the discussion or action plan development (unless another member of MaRG knows them and had not been involved in the referral). In such cases, one suggestion was to go back to the referrer for further information (or action to engage) before accepting it to the MaRG:

“try and be creative and try a different way of engagement. Show me that you’re trying different ways of engaging with the person, and then I will consider putting it in the MaRG.” (P08)

It was explained that the idea initially had been that between the time of the referral being accepted and the meeting to discuss the case, **someone from Changing Futures/Expert Citizens would try to work with the customer to find out more about them, their experiences and wishes.**

“that [someone from Expert Citizens] would be able to link in with a referrer if there’s any issues in terms of engagement to try and strike a little bit of rapport and try and gain their insight in terms of their wishes and best hopes for the case” (P08)

In practice, there had been challenges: limited time between the referral being accepted and the MaRG and the time for any partner to build a relationship with the customer, if it does not exist.

“If nobody on MaRG has got a good relationship with that person, and then it can be difficult to get back out to that person and try to get decent work done. And again, often the lived experience will be identified as maybe the best fit to do that, what they’ve got to do is start somewhere, they’ve got to build the relationship, just because you’ve got lived experience, it’s not a magic wand is it?” (P02)

When there is no existing relationship with customers, one perspective highlighted that it may not automatically be the case that someone with lived experience is the best option to have such conversations with customers:

“just because somebody’s got lived experience, if they haven’t got that relationship with the customer, they’re not really any better fit than anyone else to have that conversation. So again, that can be a little bit problematic” (P02)

It was emphasised that working with customers, speaking to them, and getting their views should be everyone’s responsibility, not just the responsibility of people with lived experience. This is also important as not all customers may engage with Expert Citizens.

“We should all be responsible for gaining customer views and opinions, their best hopes” (P08)

One participant highlighted that, at present, it can sometimes feel like ‘we’re missing an opportunity in terms of their input and what they would want’ (P08).0

Valued contribution of the ‘lived experience voice in the room’

The contribution that members of the group with lived experience make to the MaRG was highly valued. It was highlighted that they can offer support to customers afterwards, as part of the action plan, and to try to build a relationship with customers, particularly where there may be issues around engagement.

The contribution of members with lived experience to the discussion and development of action plans during the MaRG meeting was particularly valued. It was described in very positive ways, as bringing more empathy and understanding about “what that person might be going through” (P03).

“if there’s any support we can offer the customers that come through the MaRG, but also have that lived experience voice in the room, amongst all the professionals as well” (P03)

“[lived experience members’ approach] I found really refreshing in the sense that he was giving some lived experience understanding of what we were dealing with. And

he was able to see from the service users' perspective that really smashed through in the MaRG. It stopped you in your tracks" (P09)

Some participants highlighted that, through the input of the members, lived experience generally does then feed into the action planning process, *"so there will always be an element of lived experience being involved" (P05)*. And in general, participants found the involvement of people with lived experience during the discussions valuable and refreshing.

The aspiration is to have customers at the heart, but...

Participants reported that no customers have attended the MaRG meetings. For this reason, one perspective was that customers are not then meaningfully involved in developing the action plan or solutions. In contrast, the aforementioned (dominant) perspective was that the referrer or case co-ordinator was well placed to advocate for the customer and represent their views and wishes.

Everyone supported the principle of customer representation and recognised the importance of working with people. This was considered a core part of how the MaRG works:

"This is about, fundamentally, we want to work with the individual, not do things to the individual" (P05)

The hope was that there would be ongoing discussion with customers (through the referrers or case co-ordinators), including around realistic expectations and recognition that *"it's often a long journey with a lot of twists and turns in it" (P12)*. However, this was difficult in practice especially where no partner had a good relationship with the person.

Being realistic with customers and acknowledging that partners all have their own parameters within which they are working, was also important. There can sometimes be a disconnect between what the customer wants and what it is available:

*"It's about trying to understand what the customer's wishes are, there are obviously certain parameters that each partner is working to. **So I would say that while the aspiration is always to keep those things at the heart of it, it is often about what is available that the customer can access" (P10)***

There had been progress with customers attending and being more actively involved in wider multi-disciplinary team meetings (MDTs) that may form part of the action plan from MaRG. Where this had happened, it was described as very positive, with an example of a customer being presented with more offers of support from providers because of their attendance at the MDT.

However, participants were more apprehensive about MaRG being an appropriate environment appropriate, dignified and empowering space for customers, describing it as *"really tricky" (P06)* and

“at the point of the MaRG, it is not always that straightforward” (P02). Most participants voiced this concern. This complexity was also reflected in the anonymised materials (section 4.1), where lack of engagement during the referral process seemed to mirror a perceived urgency around the customer’s situation in terms of risk (to them and others) and vulnerability.

“It’s their life isn’t it? But I think it’s really delicate, and we talk a lot about co-production, you know, the expert being there...but you’ve got to be really careful about that. I’m conscious of re-traumatising people...we’d have to be very sensitive and it can’t be tokenistic” (P07)

Although it was emphasised that the MaRG is a more positive and solution-focused meeting than others, it was highlighted that there can still be some *“negative judgements at times about customers”* (P06). Another consideration was whether the presence of customers would impact how open the professionals would be in their contributions, perhaps requiring them to adapt, not focusing on negatives or why things had not worked out in the past with the customer.

“I think professionals might be more honest and open if a customer is not there” (P06)

One participant, reflecting on a case they had referred into the MaRG, highlighted:

“We could never get (customer) well enough to be able to understand a meeting a meeting like that. So I think sometimes the dignity of the person, actually getting them in for half an hour, a lot of it may be jargon based...I’m not sure” (P09)

In the context of the importance of working with customers, after some consideration, a few of the participants wondered if customers being invited to attend some of the discussion around their case specifically could be trialled but emphasised on a case-by-case basis (this is discussed further below).

Customer representation could improved

Some participants felt this was an area that could be improved through making customer representation a more explicit and focal part of the MaRG discussions. It was highlighted that it can sometimes be helpful to see a face and *“to humanise it a bit more”* (P08) and because *“we can’t just be judging people on paper”* (P02). This was considered particularly important to identify positives and opportunities, and balance what one participant highlighted as very negative risk assessments at present.

Broadly, there were three perspectives on how improvements in this area. The first related to more creative ways to capture the customer’s views and wishes in advance of the MaRG meeting. With the support of the referrers, customer’s views and wishes could be captured through an audio clip, video, or statement, that could be shared at the MaRG meeting.

“But to bring their voices, maybe we could record, video record or have some people doing a statement if that’s possible with that person, then it really does make an impact. If their voices are heard. But like I said, it might be hard for people to do that. But it is something we could maybe encourage a bit more. Perhaps some people don’t know that they can do that, I’m not sure” (P03)

A second perspective was to involve the customer more explicitly in discussions after the initial MaRG discussion between partners. For example, as with some previous cases, holding an MDT with the customer after the MaRG meeting to share the action plan and inform the customer what had been decided at the MaRG and who would be taking it forward.

“that could be part of the wrapping up, at the end of the MaRG [discussion at the meeting], just saying, you know, ideally this is about this customer. It would be really good if they were informed of that we discussed today. The MaRG will be asking for some updates from their perspective ready for the next MaRG, because that is something we could do there” (P11)

The third perspective was more complex and contentious: if someone is “*stable enough*” they could join the discussion, or a specific time slot, over Teams to be more actively involved in the action planning for their own case.

“I think sometimes it would help if people knew and they could hear and see what’s going on and how it works. And sometimes that’s a catalyst enough” (P08)

As mentioned above, participants emphasised this would need to be considered case-by-case and potentially trialled, rather than being a blanket approach for the MaRG to assess “*if it would be productive on all angles to do*” (P06) – i.e., for the customer and the partners involved.

“I think you’ve got to weigh it up on case-by-case whether it’s appropriate. But I definitely don’t think it should be a rule either way” (P07).

4.2.3. Sustainability

Overall, there was agreement that the MaRG needs to continue beyond Changing Futures funding. This was linked to the perceived benefits of the MaRG and the purpose it fills in the current system of support for ‘high risk’ cases: “*we need this big multi-agency response to help people*” (P03).

“I think there will always be a need for it in the city...I wish not, but there it is” (P11)

It was felt that the human cost would be great if the MaRG did not exist:

“simple answer is, they will...take more drugs, they will die by suicide, or they will go back to prison. And those are the three most common things” (P04)

Participants felt the need for the MaRG would even greater in the absence of Changing Futures and their co-ordination of the support for people experiencing multiple disadvantage. It was also emphasised that Changing Futures funding is crucial to the MaRG’s current operation, i.e., with the Independent Chair, the valued contributions of the Changing Futures case managers and staff with lived experience (note: whilst participants often talked about the latter as the contribution of Expert Citizens, the roles are funded through Changing Futures).

“I think it’s a real shame because I couldn’t see anyone else being able to replicate that without the funding and without the Independent Chair and the Changing Futures input. I just hope something can be done, unless it went back to a local authority led initiative. But again, I don’t know how that would work” (P06)

Another view was more optimistic and expressed confidence that it would continue because *“...it’s more than the sum of its parts, not one particular bit of it” (P12)*. The importance of relationships was emphasised and there seemed to be a reliance on individuals/advocates within organisations to make it work:

“I think it takes people with courage within individual organisations that just keep going” (P01)

Generally, there was uncertainty about what the future MaRG model might be, how it would be funded and who would host it. Despite the perceived value and benefits, there were concerns for the MaRG’s sustainability given budget cuts and austerity measures.

Suggestions for further work with partners

To strengthen the MaRG (and the case for its continuation), participants recommended further work with partners to develop more awareness and understanding about the MaRG. This included professionals who might think about referring into the MaRG, and those who attend, to clarify and *“sharpen it up a bit” (P08)* in terms of:

“what it is, what we want to achieve with it because I still think people even now, after all these years, there’s a little bit of, people are unsure what it’s about” (P08)

The history of the MaRG prior to Changing Futures was acknowledged and it was highlighted that different versions of the referral form have been used rather than Changing Futures version of the

MaRG form. There was a suggestion to simplify the administration, which often concerned the time required to complete the referral form:

“sometimes it can almost feel like something you haven’t got time to do – I think that’s a mistake to think like that. But if I do that, maybe others do” (P09)

There had also been some confusion for partners around whether they should make a referral to Changing Futures or the MaRG. It was acknowledged that *“it’s been an evolving thing”* (P10), and that capacity in the Changing Futures team had reduced.

It was highlighted that a previous challenge was ensuring that the ‘right’ cases were heard at MaRG. It was emphasised that MaRG is pitched at a level above MDTs, which should be the first course of action. In making a referral to MaRG, it has to be clear that all the usual avenues have been tried: *‘you need to demonstrate what it is you’ve done already’* (P12).

Some participants explained that the Changing Futures team had already discussed running workshops with partner organisations to improve awareness of the MaRG/remind people of the purpose. This was considered an important next step to try and consolidate partners’ awareness and may help to ensure all those involved are onboard and working to the same principles around collaboration and collective risk (particularly in response to the perceived ‘slacking off’ of some partners more recently).

This would also help statutory services and NHS partners to better understand the MaRG way of working *“in order to bend around it”* (P07). Working further with partners may also help to address the perceived attitude and lack of flexibility of other agencies. Some participants did discuss that this had improved, whereas others felt there was still a disconnect at times:

“There’s still a lot of work to do, I think in terms of that attitude and flexibility across the sectors. And I do get it, like I said earlier, you need to stay safe.” (P02)

In addition, it was recommended **to regularly send out the Terms of Reference** to the group to serve as a constant reminder of what the group are trying to achieve here compared to ‘business as usual’ approaches.

More consideration and recognition of how the MaRG fits with the wider system was also recommended. This would help to ensure that those at the top of organisations are aware of its work, and support their staff to make referrals (i.e., allow them necessary time). This could also help to develop more space for discussions around ‘flex’ at that top level.

“MaRG needs to have a place as a component part in the whole structure of managing and dealing with and addressing vulnerability and safeguarding” (P12)

Participants emphasised that it would be helpful to work with partners to gain feedback from more professionals that have referred into the MaRG, to understand how their experiences of MaRG differed to those of an MDT. The Independent Chair circulates periodic updates about the work of the MaRG to the Changing Futures Programme Board. Circulating this to a wider audience could be a means of sharing examples that demonstrate to partners the value of the MaRG's approach (and potentially future funders) and provide reassurance about the collective support available through the MaRG:

"really highlighting where people have made that risky decision and what support they had, so someone going around doing case studies or conversations with people who have done referrals at MaRG would be really good" (P11)

"Sharing and shouting about the positive outcomes and how that can have a real impact to us all, I suppose encourage people" (P02)

There was support for the continuation of the Community of Practice that takes forward topics that regularly arise at the MaRG (e.g., arson, cuckooing, and barriers to accommodation). Again, the collaborative nature of that work was praised highly.

Another set of recommendations related to working with partners to review who currently attends and whether they are the 'right people' at the 'right' level, i.e., can make decisions there and then about 'flexing' their standard processes. Related to this, it was proposed this reviewing should take place regularly to see if there are other people/services that would have something to offer *"and make a contribution to MaRG and maybe plug a gap that is there"* (P12).

Linked to this, was the need to strengthen the case for sustainability by providing periodic strategic feedback on the MaRG's activities as a whole:

"What I haven't seen so far is any kind of strategic feedback about... The MaRG has seen this many cases. I think that's a good time to be doing that [sharing feedback]. You want to be doing that at least every two years... that would also improve stability that when you come back to tender or whatever. But I think an annual critique would be a good thing" (P04)

One participant also queried whether commissioners were involved in the MaRG and, if so, it would help them to work with services to understand the patterns, needs, and gaps, and what might be commissioned to address those gaps. That was described as *"a real opportunity for services"* (P07) to demonstrate what support is needed.

A final observation was the potential interest in looking at other local areas to explore similar approaches outside of Stoke-on-Trent, to compare, contrast and learn from each other's approaches.

Future model

Generally, there were three perspectives on the funding/hosting of the MaRG beyond Changing Future's tenure. It should be noted that across each, the need for an Independent Chair was emphasised. The first view was that the priority is that it needs to continue, so whoever hosts it is less important, because it is a collective partnership: *"I don't think it matters who's doing it, that forum is needed"* (P07).

The second perspective was that the MaRG should remain with the local authority (*"[they] ought to be owning the MaRG"* (P12) because the local authority has a degree of responsibility for its citizens and a remit that encompasses multiple factors. Although Changing Futures money comes from central government (rather than the local authority), some participants did not make this distinction and talked about the MaRG and Changing Futures as sitting with/being part of the local authority, and thought that could continue.

The third perspective opposed the MaRG sitting with the local authority and emphasised that it should be led by an independent person, and be independent of the local authority. Some of this related to concerns that it would be more *"cold and clinical"* (P08) and focused on safeguarding queries. There were also concerns about whether the Independent Chair would be viewed as truly independent if funded through the local authority or another partner (although as above, not all participants were aware of that). A collaboratively funded role was suggested as a way to further support the chair's independence.

"I think if every partner made a commitment to resourcing the Independent Chair role, obviously depending on the size of the organisation, actually then there'd be collective ownership of the role as well" (P05)

With regards to the Independent Chair in the future model, some participants reflected on the merits of an Independent Chair compared to the previous model where there were rotating chairs from partner organisations. The dominant perspective favoured the Independent Chair who can focus specifically on that role during meetings and noted that a previous lack of volunteers to serve as a rotating chair. Another perspective described benefits to both approaches and highlighted that when it was chaired by one of the partners *"that did work well because they had to buy into it"* and *"got the urgency of it"* (P11) – and they also had detailed knowledge about services, and individuals. Despite possible benefits of sustainability and reducing costs of a rotating chair, most participants felt it was critical for the Chair to remain independent, but with uncertainty about how this would be funded.

As mentioned previously, with the current model, Changing Futures case managers review the referrals that are made to MaRG to prioritise, with the Independent Chair, the cases that will be discussed at the next meeting. The case managers also liaise with the professionals that have made the referral and give feedback to them with suggestions for what their next steps should be if the

referral were not accepted (e.g., advised to come together as an MDT then return to MaRG if required), and offered to attend MDTs. They also circulate the paperwork, take action focused notes from the meetings, and follow up on actions in between meetings. They also respond to queries and offer advice to professionals about potential MaRG referrals. Thus, the case managers play a crucial role in the MaRG. It was suggested that, in future, a specific co-ordinator attached to the MaRG would be a valuable addition:

“I think if you had a co-ordinator attached, there’s so much more that they could do... somebody to take that responsibility for pulling it together, I think that would be really effective” (P02)

There was a sense that a co-ordinator could be more proactive in identifying potential solutions whilst preparing for the meeting. It would be important to make sure roles and responsibilities of the Independent Chair and co-ordinator were clear.

Another suggestion for the future was to factor in resource to *“support a service”* (P11) to take a risk; for example, to cover the cost in the event of property damage where accommodation providers take on customers that they might not typically.

It was clear that whichever organisation(s) takes on the MaRG, as lead, the collaborative nature of the group and involvement of all relevant partners is essential, and the need for partners’ *‘collective responsibility’* (P01) was urged for MaRG sustainability:

“I think people need to take collective responsibility. Ultimately, yes, Changing Futures money was brilliant, and somebody got the opportunity to do that. However, Changing Futures money isn’t going to be there forever” (P01)

Similarly, there is a need for services to adapt their cultures and policies to work with people at the centre of ‘high risk’ cases, instead of the response being *“they’re not suitable for our service”* (P02) as one participant discussed:

“...and have that conversation that actually, it’s our city, it’s our responsibility to look after the people of Stoke. And I’d like to see that probably a little bit more structured in terms of people’s commitment to that and as partners across the city” (P02)

Though it should be noted that ‘commitment’ here related to regular attendance and a willingness to be part of the solution, rather than indicating a financial commitment.

These quotes speak **to the need for the systems to change** to improve how it (not only the MaRG) routinely works with customers experiencing multiple disadvantage. In contrast, the MaRG currently operates as a service within the system, helping to alleviate pressures/work around barriers.

It was highlighted that if the MaRG runs for long enough, it may become embedded in the system, being replicated as the way of collaborative working across the wider system. Participants did not feel there would be a sufficient shift in partnership working by the end of Changing Futures funding, but there was optimism that it could in theory be achieved after another two to three years of funding.

MaRG meetings

Another part of the MaRG mode to further explore is the frequency and duration of meetings. One perspective was that two hours per meeting is too long (albeit once a month), particularly for those in senior roles, and when considering the additional preparation time required. Here it was felt there was scope to shorten the discussion during meetings (e.g., around systemic issues) and to focus more promptly and directly on *“let’s have some actions”* (P07). This also shows the need to balance the time commitment for the ‘right’ level of people involved. Another highlighted that when they read the referral forms ahead of the meeting, they feel they can quickly work out what package might work/what needs to happen before the meeting takes place.

A second perspective valued the time and space to discuss each case in detail and ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the discussion. This perspective urged MaRG to maintain small numbers of cases to consider at each meeting *“so we can get a bit more time to actually talk through the case”* (P12).

Ultimately, further discussion with all partners about what might help make the most efficient and valuable use of time for this particular forum would be useful to help shape plans for the future model. Another element to this that ought to be considered is the regularity. It was emphasised that at the point of escalating to MaRG, it tends to be a crisis point and time sensitive.

“but then when people refer them on, they tend to be at crisis and the sooner we can get there the better really” (P02)

It was felt that sometimes one meeting per month is insufficient, although it was acknowledged that the numbers referred in varies. There was a suggestion to trial two meetings per month, which in turn could allow the duration of each meeting to shorten. Ultimately, the engagement of as many partners as possible was essential and, therefore, further discussions with partners to identify the preferred options would be useful.

The following quote speaks to the value participants placed on the MaRG:

“I would like more room for more cases, I do think the MaRG serves a very useful purpose. The MaRG doesn’t work miracles, that’s a terrible expectation to place on people. But in terms of improving the overall situation and drawing things together,

and drawing the services together in a cohesive way, it does a lot of good in that way”
(P04)

Calls to shift to more face-to-face

The importance of relationships and working together was emphasised at various points during interviews. Most participants recommended that future meetings should shift to being primarily face-to-face to help develop and strengthen working relationships and get to know other professionals better, especially those newer in post. Participants felt that this could also support the collaborative and solution-focused nature of MaRG discussions, by ensuring people were present, “*focused*” (P02) and prepared to actively engage in the discussion:

“To really build relationships and rapport with individuals working in other services, sit around a table and do it” (P01)

“I think sometimes people do just log on and carry on working [when joining over Teams]. And actually, you need to be actively listening and really come prepared to think, yeah what can we do to try and solve this and collectively, it’s amazing what you can come up with” (P02)

It was acknowledged that “*sometimes it’s really helpful that it’s on Teams*” (P10) but having space to “*bring all the partners around*” (P11) and to come together to build relationships was considered vital. Having time at the beginning of the meetings, e.g., with refreshments, so that people could connect was also suggested. Another participant highlighted:

“Even just connecting outside of it being any shop talk, but it’d be a space to connect on that relational level, build collaboration, build partnership, that would be helpful”
(P10)

However, if someone is unable to attend physically (and/or is unable to send a representative) then having the option for partners to join online may be preferable so that they are still able to be part of the discussion:

“...given the chance of someone attending virtually, or not attending at all, you might prefer them to attend virtually” (P05)

Some participants highlighted that the venue for the meetings is always the Civic Centre and recommended looking at alternatives. It was emphasised that the MaRG is a group of partners and, therefore, hosting at other venues was suggested. A further suggestion was to rotate the venue around the different partner organisations.

5. Summary and recommendations

The MaRG was described as a collaborative, solution-focused group led by the Independent Chair. In working together, it allows for a collective package of support to be developed that, through the involvement of other partners, shares the 'risk' and presents opportunities that would not otherwise be available for cases regarded as 'high risk'.

This study focused on three elements of the current MaRG: the role of the independent chair, customer representation, and views on sustainability. Key points from each are summarised.

5.1 The role of the Independent Chair

The role of Independent Chair was considered critical in setting the tone of the MaRG as collaborative and solution-focused. There was praise for the role, and the current chair.

Key elements of the role:

- Reminds partners of the collaborative nature of the MaRG, challenges partners to think differently within that about what they could offer as part of a collective package and provides assurances around the shared risk.
- Leads the discussion around updates on cases/progress against the action plan which increases accountability.
- Independence is vital in performing those functions without any conflict of interest or ulterior motive.
- Independence provides credibility, showing partners that the chair was neutral and therefore well placed to challenge partners and hold them to account.
- Independence allows the chair to focus on ensuring the discussion is productive and solution-focused.

Overall: Participants recommended maintaining the role of the independent chair for future models.

5.2 Customer representation

No customers have attended a MaRG meeting. The assumption is that customer representation happens through the referrer who would be working with the customer, and the lived experience experts that are part of the group.

- However, customer representation varies (different versions of the referral form may have contributed to this):

- Some referrers discussed working with customers and updating them afterwards and on progress.
- There can be little engagement between customers and agencies as part of the MaRG referral process, with particular challenges when the referrer is not working with the customer/when no agency has a good relationship with a customer.
- Contributions of lived experience members of the MaRG were highly valued (both in terms of support they can provide to customers afterwards and their contributions to the solutions identified and action plans developed)
- Working with customers and understanding their wishes and experiences should be everyone's responsibility.
- There is also a need to be realistic with customers, as there can be a difference between what their wishes and what may be available to them to access.

Overall: Participants believed that customer representation could be improved, with three main views:

- Referrers should be encouraged to use alternative/more creative methods to capture customer's wishes beforehand, e.g., a video clip/audio (in the Terms of Reference)
- Routinely hold MDTs (post-MaRG) with the customer to share the action plan.
- MaRG to discuss a trial of inviting customers to take part in the MaRG discussion around the action plan and next steps (on a case-by-case basis). Related concerns included the need to ensure this would be dignified and empowering for customers.

5.3 Sustainability and implications for the future MaRG model

There was agreement that the MaRG should continue beyond Changing Futures as part of the current system. The current waiting list for cases to be heard at the MaRG demonstrates the ongoing need. Participants emphasised that there would be a high human cost if MaRG were not sustained. The need for the MaRG would increase in the absence of Changing Futures, given the support and co-ordination that programme provides for cases related to multiple disadvantage.

Changing Futures funding has been essential to how the MaRG currently operates. There was some uncertainty about how it would continue beyond Changing Futures (in terms of how it would be funded, and which organisation would host it). Key points related to sustainability are summarised.

5.3.1 Membership considerations

- The contribution of partners is crucial to the MaRG's success.
- Participants emphasised the need to have the 'right people' (i.e., accommodation providers/those who can facilitate access to services), at the 'right level' (i.e., sufficiently senior to make decisions about flexing their usual processes/procedures).
- Partners needed to have the 'right mentality', being committed to the solution-focused, collaborative ethos of the MaRG, and be willing to try to work differently.
- Partners are expected to 'do their homework' and attend MaRG prepared to contribute as part of the shared effort. This allows solution-focused discussion during meetings.
- Challenges identified:
 - Preparation and the flexibility needed was not happening with all partners. Some partners were described as 'slacking off' in terms of attendance and their perceived attitude/lack of flexibility to do something differently.
 - An over-stretched system, lack of capacity, and defaulting back to the standard policies or procedures can mean that even the most senior staff encounter push back after the meeting.

5.3.2 Further work with partners

To enhance the MaRG and to strengthen the case for its continuation, participants called for further work with partners. This included professionals who would potentially refer into the MaRG and those who attend, to 'sharpen it up' and develop understanding and awareness of the MaRG. Specifically:

- Regularly share the Terms of Reference.
- Share and urge partners to use the most recent referral form.
- As the Changing Futures team have discussed, hold workshops with partners to ensure clarity and shared understanding about the MaRG, its approach and expectations of partners.
- Some participants also suggested collating and sharing up-to-date information on the remits of partners in terms of that they could and could not realistically be asked to do differently, i.e., their 'red lines'. For example, it was highlighted that accommodation providers have to remain within the confines of their insurance policies.

- Review attendance and any gaps in membership.
- Further work with statutory organisations (i.e., the local authority and health) to improve understanding of the MaRG works and how to 'bend' or flex their processes (making it clear that the ask is never going to be outside of the law, and how this relates to equity rather).
- Further work with partners about how the MaRG fits into the wider system.
- Strategic feedback to partners on MaRG activities, e.g:
 - Case studies with professionals who have referred in to highlight the difference the MaRG made to the case, compared to an MDT.
 - Sharing examples of when partners took 'a risk', what went well and what else could have helped, to learn from examples and to encourage and reassure other partners.
 - Feedback to commissioners, to highlight gaps in the system and its capacity for cases considered as 'high risk'. E.g., accommodation and wrap around support.

5.3.3 Meetings

- Meeting should be primarily face-to-face meetings, to help build relationships between professionals, further supporting the solution-focused, collaborative nature of the MaRG's work.
- Potential to hold the meeting at other venues and/or rotate around partners.
- MaRG members to discuss regularity and duration of meetings to balance the demands for people at the 'right' level. More regular meetings were suggested to respond to the urgency of cases and evident demand.
- If partners are unable to attend, or send a fully briefed representative, then it may be preferable that they join over Teams rather than being absent from the discussions.
- Regularly send out the Terms of Reference and the most up-to-date referral form.

5.4 Recommendations

Findings from participants will feed into the wider Changing Futures evaluation. Based on participants views, a standalone set of recommendations are suggested for consideration and development.

1. **Continuity beyond Changing Futures.** The MaRG should continue beyond Changing Futures.
2. **Independent Chair.** The Independent Chair role should be continued.
3. **Meeting format.** MaRG members should discuss and agree the preferred frequency, duration, and location for (face-to-face) meetings to ensure that all partners can share their thoughts and buy-in to the optimal model.
4. **Lived experience.** Keep lived experience voices on the MaRG panel, with cost implications beyond Changing Futures.
5. **Partner contributions/exceptions.** The collaborative nature of the MaRG and the involvement of all relevant partners is essential, regardless of the funder(s)/host(s). Partners were urged to take collective responsibility. Practical steps include clarifying the Terms of Reference and an induction discussion for those joining the MaRG (e.g., member expectations, organisational redlines to consider), possibly with a short video to explain, and further discussions/workshops (planned) to address barriers and promote buy-in (e.g., reviewing who attends, feedback to partners/commissioners, sharing case studies with professionals that have referred in). These could explore the appetite amongst partners for firming up commitment with an agreement.
6. **MaRG case co-ordinator.** Most progress happens when a case co-ordinator is working on behalf of and with customers. A case co-ordinator dedicated to the MaRG (part-time) could perform the functions of the current Changing Futures case managers, have more time to follow up actions, help to address barriers and potentially be more proactive in identifying solutions ahead of the MaRG meeting.
7. **Personal Budget allocation.** Make funds available to the MaRG to support providers to take a risk (e.g., to cover costs related to accommodation).
8. **Future costs, funder and host.** The estimated annual cost for a future model is over £40,000: Independent Chair £12,000; part-time case co-ordinator £22,000; Personal Budget £6,000 based on £200 per customer, 30 customers per year; potential cost of future lived experience representation. In response to uncertainty around who would host and fund the MaRG beyond Changing Futures, three main views are represented:
 - i. Priority is that it continues outweighs concern about who hosts it.
 - ii. MaRG should remain with the local authority as they have some responsibility for all citizens and a remind that covers a range of factors.

- iii. MaRG should sit outside of the local authority. The Independent Chair could be collaboratively funded by the partner organisations.
9. **Wider systems change following the MaRG approach.** At present, the MaRG seems to operate as a service within the system to alleviate pressures or work around the barriers that exist in the wider system and processes. This speaks to the need for wider systems change to improve how the system routinely works with customers at the centre of 'high risk cases' who experience multiple disadvantage. Trying replicate the MaRG as a way of working (i.e., collaborative, flexible, partnership working) across the system is one way to move this forward.
10. **Accommodation.** The work of the MaRG confirms the perennial challenge of the wider system, i.e., insufficient accommodation options for people experiencing multiple disadvantage.
11. **Data sharing.** Explore how CRM (currently Liquid Logic) could support MaRG (e.g., populating the information for the referral form to reduce the reliance on referrer's knowledge so it is not relying on the knowledge of the referrer; having a place to indicate it is a MaRG case on the CRM system to allow for examination of outcomes for cases that have been to MaRG.