



Resetting after Covid-19: A guide for third sector on using evidence for forward planning

The pandemic has had a massive impact on the way we in the third sector do our work. You may have suspended your service, adapted your services to deliver online or completely changed your focus and client group. Some changes will have gone well, others less well.

So it is useful to consider **what you have learnt** and **use** this learning to plan and improve how you work in the future – and perhaps to influence others such as funders and decision-makers.

That means taking time (on your own or as a team) to

1. pause
2. pull together what you know
3. reflect on what this means for you and others

1

Pause

Take time to gather together your thoughts, other perspectives and relevant evidence. You can do this on your own, but team sharing allows for other perspectives and brings colleagues on board with any changes you might then want to make.

2

Pull together what you know

You can start with the evidence and work out what that is telling you, or you can start with a specific question and look for evidence to answer it. See below for different ways to go about doing this.

3

Reflect what this means for you and others

You need to decide how you will use or present the evidence, bearing in mind the audience and how they will use the information.

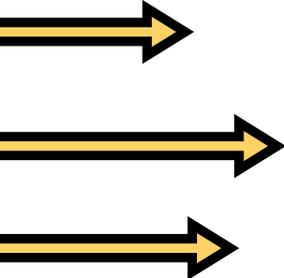
A note on evidence:

Evidence can come from a range of sources:

- service users and community members
- staff and volunteers
- third parties
- internal records
- external statistics and research

It might be statistics or stories.

Don't worry if the evidence of your work during Covid-19 is less formal or somewhat patchier. You might be drawing on different sources of evidence than usual (e.g. social media). Be transparent about what you know and what you don't - and be prepared to dig a bit deeper if you feel the evidence is not good enough to reach a conclusion or to make a decision.



Some general questions to ask yourself about your Covid-19 delivery

What changed and why?

How did this affect

- The number and type of activities (cost effectiveness and sustainability)
- The number and type of people you supported? (reach)
- Feedback (how people felt about your support)
- How successful you were in achieving outcomes (what worked/didn't)

What can you conclude

- About changing needs of service users
- About cost effectiveness
- About how to reach your service users / the people you work with
- About what matters to them
- In what circumstances you help them achieve positive outcomes

Who needs to know

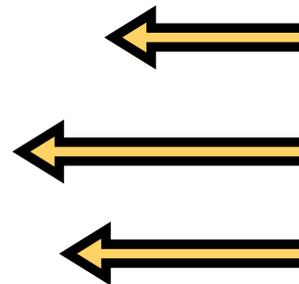
- Board
- Front line worker
- Manager
- Funder
- Policy influencer

How might they use the evidence

- To make decisions about planning and improving services
- To report to funders and other stakeholders
- To improve policy and practice

How should you present your learning to make it most effective/useful?

The above questions don't need to be answered in this order. If time is short (and it usually is!) you can focus on the questions that are most important.



In the next section we present different starting points or approaches for asking and answering your Covid-19 reflection questions:

1. Map what activities and outcomes **changed** during Covid-19
2. Compare how the **evidence** (stats and stories) gathered during Covid-19 compares with "normal" (pre-Covid-19)
3. Identify a specific **question** you are interested in (for example, what have we learned about partnership working during Covid-19?)
4. Identify a **decision** you need to make
5. Explore a **hunch**
6. Explore something **unusual or surprising**

These approaches overlap so pick the one that seems most helpful for you.

1 Mapping out what changed - in broad terms

There may have been many stages to your organisation's Covid-19 experience. It's easy to forget early learning and even what was ever "normal" so it can help to go back to your original work and evaluation plans and remind yourself what you planned and then what you did. You might use a simple table:

	Activities	With/for whom	Outcomes	Evidence collected
What did you plan?				
What did you do?				
Why the change?				

This may spark reflections about what's worked well and not, and what you might want to keep or drop in the future.

For example (about service provision): you planned to give advice face to face. You had to move to telephone, text and video calls. This worked well for some clients, but not for others. Lack of good IT, internet, skills and confidence affected some. You want to reinstate face to face for some clients because it's easier to communicate and pick up clues about needs. But you want to keep multiple ways for clients to use the service to maximise accessibility and convenience.

For example (about evaluation): you planned to use formal evaluations with a scale assessment. This was dropped during Covid-19 because staff felt it was too formal. Now you don't have quantitative figures about distance travelled, but you do have richer quotes and comments. You might reinstate the scales, but ask for comments.

2 Comparing how the evidence (stats and stories) gathered during Covid-19 compares with “normal” (pre-Covid-19)

Look at your data/evidence and what it tells you about:

- Number of people you supported and who they are (service user characteristics)
- Number of activities and numbers using/attending
- Client feedback
- Outcomes achieved – numbers and examples

You might want to compare this with “normal”, then ask yourself some questions such as

- If the numbers of people we worked with were different, why did numbers go up or down?
- Did we get better/worse outcomes and why?
- What are service users telling us they like or dislike about virtual support?
- What service user needs are we learning about? How have needs changed?

You might need to gather further evidence to answer these “how and why” questions....

For example: practitioners from a family support organisation had assumed the digital service during Covid-19 had not been as effective in supporting families as the previous face to face provision. Their stats told them they had increased their reach and reduced waiting lists, however they weren't sure if they were helping families achieve outcomes. By collating and analysing their feedback from families (recording impromptu quotes and sending out a survey) they found that the digital service had helped the majority of families achieve their outcomes (being better able to cope). Clients also told them they found the digital service more accessible and flexible than in-person appointments. [See full case study.](#)

3 Identify a specific question you want to answer

Here are some examples:

- What have we learnt about working with others / partnership working?
- What have we learnt about how to reach a specific group of people?
- What have we learnt about working on line; when it works and doesn't?
- What have we learnt about what really matters to people and how we can build that into the way we work?

You should identify the information you need to answer your question, what it is telling you and decide if further information is needed.

Example: a rural community development trust asked themselves the question *"What have we learnt about partnership working?"*

During the pandemic the community development trust partnered with a local food bank and cross referred their clients to each other. By analysing their statistics on their reach and gathering verbal feedback (through wellbeing phone calls) the trust could see the positive impact of working in partnership. They learnt that they should collaborate more in the future to benefit the community and that it works well to partner with an organisation with a slightly different role. [See full case study.](#)

4 Identify a decision you need to make

Here are some examples:

- Should we transfer all of our workshops online?
- What blend of hybrid working should we adopt?
- How will we market our services in the future?
- How should we prioritise our work / target groups?

Having picked your question, think about:

- What information you need to make those decisions – and perhaps what information others such as your board might need
- What information do you already have
- What else you need to check or collect

Example: an organisation providing therapeutic support to women facing pregnancy loss asked themselves: “Should we continue to support clients online as well as face to face?”

When reviewing stats the organisation discovered they had delivered more one-to-one sessions with a greater number of clients, showing they were able to reach more women. By analysing quotes from women who had used the face to face support in comparison to those who had received online support, they found that the impact was the same for the majority of clients. However, their analysis showed that face to face support was still crucial for vulnerable clients, which helped them plan a blended model of delivery. [See full case study](#)

5 Explore a hunch

You will have rich experience of what’s worked and not worked – particularly if you are a front-line worker or volunteer. Your first step might be to share those experiences and the tentative conclusions you have reached.

It might be a simple matter of reflecting on what you have noticed about what’s working or what is better or worse.

But then you need to check that your evidence backs your conclusions.

For example: at ESS we had a hunch that demand for paid tailored support had been affected. But when we checked the figures compared with previous years, except for the first 3 months of lockdown, we concluded that there is still the same appetite for paid support. (Even our hunches are wrong sometimes!)

6 Explore something unusual or surprising

For example, you might want to unpack an unexpected outcome or an activity that was particularly successful/unsuccessful and use that reflection to identify any broader learning or future implications.

Example: we are now able to reach people across the world with our digital support. Is this something we want to explore?

Conclusion

This guide is about exercises that a third sector organisation can take to reflect on Covid-19 learning, leading to your own improvement. But remember that others might be interested too – for example similar organisations or your funder.

So, if appropriate, think about how you might share what you learned.



Other resources

[Challenges and Changes due to Covid-19: Useful questions for analysis and reporting](#)

The RSA framework is a popular way to think what you want to keep doing and what you want to drop as we go back to more normal times.

[Patchwork of evidence - Questions to plan for your 'new' normal - Evaluation Support Scotland](#)

[How good is my evidence?](#) A guide to assessing the quality of self-evaluation evidence

[Is the whole greater than the sum of its parts?](#) Taking an outcome-based approach to evaluating your partnership

ESS webpage [evaluating at a distance](#)

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