

# Piecing a story together

*Learning and evaluation in trusts  
and foundations during Covid-19*

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## Introduction

Covid-19 is changing the funding world like nothing before it. Funders are responding with unprecedented speed to challenges that none of us expected. And doing so in the face of comprehensive and continuing uncertainty. Trusts and foundations have found themselves turning around grant applications in days and making near instant decisions on matters – such as converting project grants to unrestricted funding or transforming reporting requirements – that have been hotly debated for years.

Like the charities, community organisations and social enterprises they support, funders are starting to look to the future and to ask what this all means for their plans and strategies and for the way they do their business. Evaluation and learning staff have a critical role to play in supporting their foundations in the difficult decisions about strategy and priorities that lie ahead. And in helping their organisations to hold onto new behaviours and practices that have served them well through the immediate crisis and can continue to do so into the future.

[Based on an approach we are using with VCSE organisations](#), in the last week of April, IVAR facilitated two online sessions of the Evaluation Roundtable Community of Practice, open to all foundation staff leading on evaluation and learning. Our aim is to create a space where they can share challenges and dilemmas, and learn from each other's experiences in their efforts to put learning at the heart of their foundations' response going forward. This briefing shares the experiences of the 20 staff participating in these first sessions and our reflections on the questions and opportunities for funders that they raise. We will revisit and build on these in further sessions in June.

### About the Evaluation Roundtable

Since 2014, IVAR has convened the [UK Evaluation Roundtable](#) – which offers independent trusts and foundations an opportunity to gather and reflect on the design, development and use of different approaches to evaluation and learning. It is supported by grants from Oak Foundation and Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

There is a convening every 18 months, in partnership with the Center for Evaluation Innovation who run the US Evaluation Roundtable. A smaller Community of Practice for foundation staff leading on evaluation and learning began meeting in October 2019.

With thanks to CCLA, partners of the UK Evaluation Roundtable since its first convening in 2014.

If you are interested in joining, please email [vanessa@ivar.org.uk](mailto:vanessa@ivar.org.uk)



## The experience of leading on learning through the current crisis

Like all their colleagues, the early days of lockdown saw evaluation and learning staff caught up in finding ways to manage remote working alongside their individual health, living arrangements and caring responsibilities. Many were quickly called on to provide data to support decisions about emergency funding or how to support existing grantees: *'In the first few days, we produced loads of spreadsheets on things like "who have we carried out due diligence on in the last 2 years"'*. Some joined teams tasked with radical reshaping of programmes. Others led on developing new systems and ways of working. Some have found this fast and responsive way of working liberating: *'It's been interesting and energising to do things in 72 hours rather than 36 weeks!'*

### Challenges for the learning function under lockdown soon began to emerge

**Light touch intelligence gathering is much harder at a distance.** Many were struck by how much their role relies on informal contact: *'I'm aware of how much I used to sidle up to people – that's much harder to do!'*. Or simply by sharing a space with others: *'Normally I'm able to do a lot of work in a large team by having informal conversations and that's how I pick up what's going on'*. Conscious of their responsibility to capture what is happening and help their organisations make sense of it, at the same time evaluation and learning staff feel cautious about anything that might add a burden to hard-pressed colleagues, who are rightly focused on grantees and new applicants. At a distance, it is hard to judge the right moment to connect: *'It's difficult to gauge how busy colleagues are and when to approach them – especially in frontline roles. Some of the communications stuff has to be surfaced much more explicitly'*.

Some are finding it **difficult to know how best to support immediate efforts to be nimble** because their usual communication routes are disrupted. Team meetings can be a good forum for spotting opportunities to help, but some are now less frequent or harder to access: *'People are using collaborative platforms to communicate within their teams, but much of this is happening in silos'*. Others are being asked to pick up important work – such as restructuring reporting arrangements or finding ways to manage the technical constraints that stand in the way of flexibility in some grant-making IT systems – but with insufficient opportunity to engage with others about what is needed: *'It's hard to design something that feels appropriate without being part of lots of conversations'*.

And some are finding themselves **outside the flow of learning**: *'There is a lot of learning going on in the organisation, but it's not coming through the learning team, so it's not joined up. There are pockets of great work ... but we don't know what's happening so we're missing things'*. This reduces their effectiveness, making it harder to contribute, to connect people's thinking and to capture data: *'We're working on lots of initiatives, but the learning is not joined up. Everyone is only talking to their own teams. I'm finding it really hard to coordinate and find links between teams'*.

**There is neither time nor resource to establish comprehensive systems** for gathering and analysing diverse data. Day-to-day interactions with grantees and applicants, for example, are critical sources of information. But this can only be collected in a very light touch way: *'There's lots of learning going on, but it's*



*about what people are seeing on the ground. It's chaotic ... and so it's about making sense of that without burdening people'. Some already have established systems and ways of working that make data collection relatively easy: 'The team are used to recording everything in Salesforce'. It's more challenging for staff working to introduce new processes at speed in a way that works for hard-pressed colleagues: 'We've made lots of system changes but it's hard to get them to stick when you have to have lots of individual conversations, rather than getting everyone together for a proper training session'.*

Evaluation and learning staff argue that **it is hard, but essential, to hold onto reflection time in the immediate crisis**. Capturing and interrogating what is going on, as it happens, is critical to a real understanding of what worked and what didn't before the story gets tidied up retrospectively and the messiness and granularity is lost: *'I'm constantly saying we need to step back, we need to see the learning'*. Many emphasise the importance of capturing and sharing learning rapidly: *'I really want people to understand that evaluation is not just an add-on. It needs to be useful right now'*. This learning has proved hard for some: *'We wanted to keep our applications open and felt this was an important role for us. But we are very low on capacity and can't work with the number of applicants in the relational way that we need to – so we've had to think again'*. Some foundations working with external evaluators found them very responsive to the need for quick reflection – others have struggled to get access to anything useful.

Despite these challenges, the experience of doing things differently is generating **optimism about the prospects of change for the longer-term**. Evaluation and learning staff are conscious of their responsibility to ensure their foundation will have data and intelligence to support difficult strategic decisions in the future. Equally important is their role in helping to hold onto the memory of working in a lighter and more agile way, as a springboard for more confident and sector-focused practices for the future:

*'The whole organisation has realised how quickly we can make grants. We are able to say to grantees: "If you apply again, it will be very light touch".'*

*'As a team we are fairly over-processed. We're now saying: "If you don't want to report to us, don't report to us, we will issue your next grant." We will be reflecting on how that makes us feel.'*

*'I'm hoping that we'll be able to be more trusting and more responsive because of this.'*

## Finding our feet in a new environment for learning

In the current crisis, innovation and lightness of touch are becoming as much part of the learning challenge as of the grant-making one. Evaluation and learning staff are using a number of approaches to help them capture data, organise their thinking and rapidly communicate learning.

### Capturing information

Capturing data is a high priority for evaluation and learning staff: *'We're not sure how we are going to do learning for the longer term so we're concentrating on capturing information, so we don't lose it'*. There is a renewed commitment to making the best use of data that is being *'accidentally generated'* from day-to-day activities rather than setting up something new. Where something more is needed, evaluation and learning staff are relying on small tweaks to



existing systems and familiar processes: *'We've added a field in Salesforce where people have a free text box to write in when they speak to grantees and I can share that with my trustees'*. Or they have developed simple and unobtrusive methods to fill gaps: *'We've been doing a lot of talking with our grantees. We've set a simple question format. It's not very scientific and we dump it all in Googledocs'*.

Efforts to encourage reflection again centre on simple, immediate questions: *'We are using the same simple questions for engagement and inquiry with colleagues and funded organisations, for example: What's changed this week? What's working well? What's not working?'*. Evaluation and learning staff are finding light-touch ways of replacing the informal contact that so many rely on: *'I've been arranging random 15-minute learning chats'*. And some are encouraging colleagues simply to *'scribble down uncertainties, concerns or ideas'* as they occur to them for sharing later.

When tasked with trying to make sense of the broader external context for funding, some would argue that the only sensible approach is to *'identify the questions and follow your nose. Don't over process, don't over rely on one source of information and try to present everything as a work in progress'*. Documents, networks, conversations, trawling social media – all play a part in *'piecing a story together'*.

## Shared spaces for reflection and learning

Eager to reinforce their colleagues' understanding that learning is embedded in everything they do and not a separate activity, evaluation and learning staff have been positioning themselves to support sharing and reflection. Some have found themselves taking on a stronger internal communications role than they would usually do: *'I'm becoming the "middle point", making sure that everyone knows what's been decided and what's going on'*. Others are creating online spaces that colleagues – and, in some cases, funded organisations – can join for an informal exchange of challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities, while they are still current: *'It's so important to do something as it happens. We have been quite deliberate about doing it in the moment and inviting partners into the space'*. Some are involved in comprehensive efforts to capture learning from the team and ideas for the future: *'We've probably had one of our most collaborative periods. We're using a new platform to ask people how they are feeling. We baselined all our staff which has identified lots of things about how we can move forward'*.

Although anxious not to add to the burden on funded organisations, evaluation and learning staff are very aware that time and space must be created to *'pause and talk to the sector about what people think is needed'*. A number have existing mechanisms for engaging collectively with grantees or key players in their areas of interest. Others have been joining sector forums and discussion groups.

## Looking forward – the big challenges

### Learning and strategy: planning for the future

Evaluation and learning staff are well aware that the most difficult questions are yet to come. All are concerned about how best to support their foundations in considering the long-term impact of Covid-19, on funded organisations, the



voluntary sector as a whole, and on their own funds and ability to support organisations in the medium to long term. Hard decisions about strategy and direction feel inevitable: *'We are not involved in the emergency response, but we will still need to ask the question "is the course we are taking still the right course?"'*

Foundations will be asking themselves: *'What matters most to us?'*, *'Where are we most needed?'*, *'What does good delivery look like now?'*, in the knowledge that the answers to these questions may make the difference between survival or closure for valued organisations doing excellent work:

*'We were thinking about how to better support financial resilience in grantees but this has existentially thrown our strategy. We're now having to think about which organisations we most want to be there in six months or a year's time, and what we can do to help them.'*

Funders are at different stages with these conversations depending on, for example: their size; the openness of their programmes; whether they are busy with emergency funding, working to maintain the longer-term funding pipeline, or closed to new applications pending strategy reviews. They have different levels of comfort and experience in making strategic decisions in complex and changing situations. For some, this is second nature: *'We use a combination of learning and instinct to make quick decisions in the short term – and then we keep reflecting in cycles'*. Others find it relatively easy to adapt quickly to changing circumstances: *'We have the luxury of not having too many rules. We unrestricted all current grants – this was an easy decision we could take. We were also able to identify other relevant partners without jumping into a cluttered landscape. It's been important to press pause, and not jump to conclusions about what grantees need.'* And some hope that the response to Covid-19 will have a radical impact on how their foundation works and strategic decisions are made: *'This is a real opportunity to shift the focus to learning, reflection and doing better rather than obsessing on proving impact'*.

## Collaboration and co-operation

Evaluation and learning staff are keen to see stronger collaboration between funders and funded organisations in unpicking the crisis and how best to respond. For some, this is a matter of efficiency and finding the right niche: *'How do we ensure we don't duplicate? But also avoid not jumping in where we are not needed. We're in the look and listen mode. Our message is that we are here, and we are adaptable'*. For others, the challenge is a systemic one, calling for a collective response: *'For learning and evaluation, when are we going to get out of our silos and think about ourselves as a system? Some really good things are happening, and we need to get together and make sure they are long lasting'*. However, when no one yet knows what the world will look, *'we all need to be quite gentle in terms of looking for conclusions'*.





## Questions and opportunities

Since the beginning of this crisis, we have been drawing on conversations with VCSE organisations and with individual foundations across the UK, as well as on our past research and the actions already taken by many, to [suggest practical ways](#) in which funders can support their grantees and the broader sector at this unprecedented time.

Our recent discussions with the Evaluation Roundtable Community of Practice have begun to reveal both how evaluation and learning staff are contributing to the continuing emergency response, and the role they can play in supporting the important decisions that lie ahead in three key areas.

### 1. Living with uncertainty

When thinking about the future, there is a real – and understandable – anxiety to create more certainty. But, realistically, sensible decisions about ‘what next’ can only be made on a rolling basis in a situation characterised by complexity and unknowns. The instinct to protect and support what you know you value is important if organisations and good work aren’t going to be lost by mistake. At the same time, it is right to worry about ‘closed clubs’, and to encourage a more radical rethink about need, contribution and ways of working going forward. Either way, careful and reflective approaches will be required:

*‘We need to work toward the best we can be for the future step by step.’*

### 2. Strategic learning

As the impact of Covid-19 continues to unfold, all VCSE organisations will be forced to look at their strategies and plans for the future. Foundations, as both members and key supporters of this sector, have their own hard questions to answer. Questions about where they can make the strongest contribution, given the financial resources and other assets at their disposal. And questions about ‘what really matters to us’ – about the values and beliefs that underpin the judgements that will have to be made about purpose and priorities.

Good evaluation and learning can’t answer these questions on their own, but they have a critical contribution to make. The adoption of a ‘strategic learning’<sup>1</sup> approach can ensure that lessons and insights from evaluation and learning have genuine status and are actively used in deliberations about next steps.

### 3. Funder practices

There is real potential to embed recent adaptations and innovations into funders’ systems and ways of working for the longer term. We suggest two areas for consideration:

- 1. Enabling and supporting good learning in uncertainty** – In the current crisis, evaluation and learning staff will offer best value if they are able to be agile and opportunistic. They need to be able to say: *‘This is what we are picking up so far, so this is what we can do – what do you think?’*.

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<sup>1</sup> Coffman, J. and Beer, T. (2011) *Evaluation to support strategic learning: Principles and practices*. Washington, DC: Center for Evaluation Innovation.



Learning staff and decision makers can then settle into a dynamic pattern of review cycles, making adjustments and improvements as they go, on a much shorter timeframe than would be normal within a three to five year strategy. Many foundations struggle to achieve the right balance between performance and accountability requirements, and the tolerance for flexibility and uncertainty that enables organisations to learn and change. This dynamic plays out in the relationship between foundations and their grantees, as well as between staff teams and their boards. Learning staff need explicit permission, encouragement and support if they are to present the kind of 'work in progress' intelligence that will enable foundations to retain the agility and responsiveness so many have shown in a crisis, for the longer term.

2. **Holding your nerve** – The pressure to find the right answer to 'What next?' is acute, not least because of the [funding cliff edge](#) facing many grantees. Set alongside this, though, is complexity and a series of unknowns. Although this is an extreme situation, social change interventions of all kinds are characterised by uncertain pathways within constantly changing contexts. Now and for the future, for evaluation and learning staff, there is a responsibility to encourage decision makers to respect the complexity – to look, listen and pay attention – and avoid rushing to simple solutions too quickly.

Funders can support this important development through the offer of spaces for thinking, reflection and sense-making, and opportunities to share ideas and insights so that they can percolate through organisations and, over time, be used to inform the complex choices and decisions we all face.

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