A photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone, with a blurred background of greenery. The image is partially obscured by a large black and white geometric shape on the right side.

Tips to help your remote project tackle loneliness

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June 2021

In this paper

In this paper, we address the issues, challenges and questions that were raised by [Building Connections Fund](#) (BCF) grant-holders as they adapted their services to the Covid-19 pandemic.

We wrote this guidance primarily for the 126 BCF grant-holders during the first stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, we hope that by publishing what we've learnt it will be useful for the many other organisations tackling the same challenges, now and in the future.

This guidance was developed through a broad, rapid scoping review in April 2020, shortly after the first UK lockdown began, in which we selected the best available sources to address grant-holders' concerns. We were careful to ensure these sources were from credible organisations, and these have been clearly referenced throughout. We updated our guidance in January 2021 to include relevant findings from the [BCF developmental evaluation](#).

About the Building Connections Fund

Launched in December 2018, the Building Connections Fund (BCF) was the first ever cross-government fund dedicated to reducing loneliness in England. In partnership with [The National Lottery Community Fund](#) and the [Co-op Foundation](#), £11.5m was awarded to 126 voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations working with different groups across England.

Funding was allocated to grant-holders to deliver learning and support. [Youth Focus: North East](#) were lead partner in the National Youth Partnership, which has developed a series of [resources](#) aimed at tackling youth loneliness and [UK Youth](#) established a national network of organisations working together to improve how the sector tackles youth loneliness, the [Belong Collective](#).

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) contracted [New Philanthropy Capital](#) (NPC) to lead a consortium of evaluation and learning partners. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted the original BCF evaluation, so from April 2020 we adopted a [developmental evaluation](#) approach to capture and share learning.

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Each section contains a summary of best practice, tips, and guidance. For more of our work on the Building Connections Fund, including our developmental evaluation and our guidance on co-design, head to thinkNPC.org/bcf.

1. Digital delivery

How can you move projects online? How do you engage users digitally rather than in-person?

How do you move your project online?

It can be daunting to think about adapting to online delivery, particularly during a time of unrivalled pressure. Breaking the process down into small steps can make it easier to get started. CAST's [Ten Digital Design Principles](#)¹ offer some practical first steps. They include:

1. **Start with user needs.** More on this below.
2. **Understand what's out there first.** Don't duplicate a system or resource that already exists.
3. **Take small steps and learn as you go.** You won't get things right the first time, and that is normal. It is best to start with a small test and build from there.
4. **Be inclusive.** Make sure your service is accessible to all your users (see [Section 2](#)).
5. **Collaborate and build partnerships.** Now more than ever, it is incredibly important to share learning and to work across the sector to solve common issues.

As you develop your online service, it's good practice to continually test, gather user feedback, and implement changes from what you are learning.

Through our developmental evaluation of the BCF, grant-holders shared the lessons they'd learned from changing their delivery models. These were:

- **Help service users increase their engagement with online activities.** See [Section 2](#).
- **Put appropriate safeguarding and privacy measures in place.** See [Section 3](#).
- **Offer choice to meet different service users' needs.** See [Section 2](#).

¹ CAST (2018) [Digital Design Principles](#).

- **Ensure support is consistent and reliable.** Healthy relationships between staff and users and maintaining regular support help to create trust and reassurance, which encourages service users to keep engaging. It is important though to set boundaries, such as being clear on the times when staff will not respond to messages.
- **Work together with local organisations to avoid duplication.** This could include establishing referral pathways, such as by working with local authorities to take advantage of their existing networks. Local authorities can help you advertise services and identify potential new service users.
- **Respond to changing user needs during different lockdowns or social distancing restrictions.** During 2020, users' needs evolved rapidly in response to changing social distancing rules and lockdowns. Grant-holders were continually adapting services as engagement fluctuated.

How can you involve users in designing your digital service?

When creating a service, it is important that it is **designed for and with your service users** as much as possible. This will help ensure that your service is useful and accessible to users and matches their preferences.

This begins with **researching your users' needs**, so that you better understand their situation, characteristics, and challenges. You might then choose to **involve users in the design, testing and implementation** of your programme.

You may feel that you are familiar with your users' needs and behaviours, but **these are likely to have changed** in recent times, so it is important to find solutions that fit your users' existing needs.

It is a good idea to **test your initial design** with staff and a smaller user group first, to make sure they are comfortable with how it works and to identify any immediate changes that you need to make. Your test group should involve users of different abilities, including those who are less digitally literate.

You should **repeat this process** of testing your service and gathering user feedback and use these insights to continuously make small improvements to your project.

The idea of researching user needs or involving users in designing your service might seem difficult during a crisis. [These blogs from Catalyst](#)² and from [NPC](#)³ suggest ways to engage with users remotely:

- Use social media to gather general feedback on non-sensitive issues.
- Use surveys to get a general feel for people's experiences and preferences.
- Conduct polls to get a quick indication of how your users feel.
- Hold in-depth interviews by phone, video call or through audio recording features on platforms such as WhatsApp. Remember that any engagement must consider ethics, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and safeguarding. See the [Section 3](#) for more on this topic.
- Test the usability of your prototype online service.

For more tips on effective codesign, you can read [NPC's codesign blog here](#).⁴

How did other organisations adapt to digital delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic? What can be learned from them?

There are multiple examples of organisations moving their services to online delivery or increasing existing online delivery that you can learn from (Figure 1).

² Roberson, J., '[Six ways to involve your users in shaping your new digital delivery—when you can't go and meet them](#)', in *Catalyst*, 1 April 2020.

³ Anderson, R., '[How to maximise user involvement opportunities in an age of social distancing](#)', in *NPC*, 21 January 2021.

⁴ Man, M., '[How to plan effective co-design](#)', in *NPC*, 16 December 2019.

Figure 1: Examples of charities that moved services online during the Covid-19 pandemic, and what they learnt.

Organisation	Original activities	Key changes	Learning
GoodGym	Runners sign up to deliver community 'missions' during their exercise in the community.	Used GoodGym's established online community to streamline mutual aid and community groups in local areas.	Build on what you already have available.
Relate	Relationship support, including face-to-face counselling.	Delivering therapy via webcam and phone.	Don't overcomplicate. You may be able to keep your essential services the same, but just move to a digital platform.
Weekday Wow Factor	Deliver engaging in-person activities to reduce isolation and loneliness and improve health inequalities and ageism.	Initially trialled WhatsApp video calls, then gradually moved to Skype. Now deliver regular Skype activities, including weekday discos.	Don't try to do everything at once. Try small changes and test them with users first.
Scouts	In-person activity sessions.	Providing families in lockdown with activities they can do from home. The activities are linked to a clear set of outcomes.	Measuring outcomes and impact is a useful way of ensuring services are useful and effective.
St Barnabas House	Specialist supportive care for local people and their families.	An online guide to coping with bereavement and a new remote counselling service.	Ask your users if there are any issues relating to Covid-19 they would like extra information or guidance on.
Young Scot	Scotland's national youth information and citizenship charity.	After conducting user research, codesigned new ways to digitally connect with young people, including through Instagram and TikTok.	User research and codesign are essential for your service to be appropriate and useful for your target groups.

2. Digital inclusion

How can you help your service users who struggle to make the most of online services, or may be digitally excluded?

Who is particularly at risk of digital exclusion?

There are different groups at risk of digital exclusion in the UK. A first step is to identify whether your users are likely to fall into any of these groups. [According to the NHS](#)⁵ these groups are:

- Older people.
- People with lower incomes.
- People without a job.
- People living in social housing.
- People with disabilities.
- People with fewer educational qualifications.
- People living in rural areas.
- People who are homeless.
- People whose first language is not English.

People can be digitally excluded for a range of reasons, including:

- Practical access or availability of hardware (equipment and internet access), or software (programmes).
- Lack of skills or knowledge.
- Negative attitudes that can come from preconceptions or bad experiences.

⁵ NHS Digital (2021) [What we mean by digital inclusion](#).

Often a combination of these barriers can prevent people from getting online. Below we set out some tips on how to address each of these.

How can you help service users access hardware or equipment?

Many people in the UK cannot access online services due to a lack of infrastructure or equipment to connect to the internet. This is probably the most difficult barrier to overcome but there are an increasing number of organisations helping people access the equipment they need to get online:

- [Turn2us](#) provide comprehensive information about eligibility for benefits and charitable grants. This could be invaluable for people who can't afford the equipment to get online.
- [#DevicesDotNow](#) (at the time of publication) is running a collection of donated tablets, smartphones, and laptops, which are distributed through local groups. They are also collecting devices such as sims, dongles, and mobile hotspots to help people with connectivity issues.

How can you help service users access the right software?

Some people are digitally excluded because charities aren't using the right software for them. Different products may suit some users better than others. Consider the accessibility and limitations of different products before deciding how to run your service (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Overview of popular video conferencing software.

Video calling platform	Accessibility	Free version capacity	Other features	What's it good for?
WhatsApp 	Audio call and chat functions. Many people already have WhatsApp.	Group audio or video calls of four people or less.		Private chat or messaging in small groups.
Skype 	App and browser versions. Simple and user-friendly format. Audio call and chat functions.	Up to 50 users in one call. NB if you pay for Office 365, you can access Skype for Business.	Includes screen sharing, document sharing, polls, interactive whiteboard, Q+A sessions.	Small to medium calls or video calls.

<p>Zoom</p> 	<p>App and browser versions. Simple and user-friendly format. Audio call and chat functions. Paid account allows purchase of toll-free numbers.</p>	<p>Up to 100 users. Calls limited to 40mins for 2+ callers with free version.</p>	<p>Includes screen sharing, polls, interactive whiteboard, hand raising, breakout rooms, recording feature. 'Flips' any images held up to the camera – meaning physical notes can be read by the rest of the group.</p>	<p>Webinars and large meetings, or meetings involving people outside your organisation.</p>
<p>Microsoft Teams</p> 	<p>Easy to set up if you already use Microsoft suite. Can be joined by browser. Audio call and chat functions.</p>	<p>Free version can host up to 300 users on video call.</p>	<p>Includes screen sharing, recording feature.</p>	<p>Keeping in touch with a team or group of people who all use the Microsoft suite, using messaging and call functions.</p>
<p>Google Hangouts</p> 	<p>Easy to set up if you already use Google suite, and does not require any software installation. Audio call and chat functions.</p>	<p>Up to 150 users in a meeting with text messaging only; up to 30 users on video call.</p>	<p>Includes screen sharing.</p>	<p>Keeping in touch with a team or group of people who all use the Google suite, using messaging and call functions.</p>

As well as the above list, there are plenty of other options for online message chats—[this comparison of messaging platforms](#)⁶ is a useful starting point. Online messaging may be useful for contacting service users living in hostels or crowded homes, or in environments where they do not want to be overheard.

[This digital toolkit](#)⁷ for mutual aid groups provides a useful breakdown of other online platforms with functions such as note taking, project management tools, and scheduling tools. In general, it is

⁶ Brisson, K., '[11 best messaging platforms compared](#)', in *VentureBeat*, 13 August 2016.

⁷ Tickell, P., '[Communities Essential Guide to Digital Tools—for Mutual Aid Groups](#)', in *The Digital Fund*, 25 May 2020.

good practice to have a range of options for users to engage with and to keep things flexible, such as by having flexible start and end times⁸ for Zoom sessions.

How can you help service users grow their skills, confidence, and knowledge online?

There are free resources available to teach basic digital skills, as well as troubleshooting services and advice on using specific tools. It can be useful to signpost service users to some of these as they may be able to offer help outside of the scope of your organisation. Developing skills is key to building confidence in getting online, which makes users more likely to participate in your digital services.

Free online resources include:

- Practical guidance and information on downloading apps for both [iPhone](#)⁹ and [Android](#)¹⁰ devices.
- Tutorials and guides on various tools and platforms including [making video calls](#)¹¹ from different devices, using [FaceTime](#),¹² using [Skype](#),¹³ using [WhatsApp](#),¹⁴ setting up and using [webcams](#),¹⁵ and using [Facebook](#)¹⁶ and [Facebook Messenger](#).¹⁷
- [BT's Skills for Tomorrow](#) courses offer a range of content to teach digital skills to users, ranging from the basics of how to use email, to more advanced topics such as coding.

⁸ Flexible start and end times for Zoom sessions allow people to leave and join at times that best suit their availability, whilst also ensuring people don't feel that they are missing out if they can't attend all of it. An example of a flexible call would be one that invites people to join from 10:00, with informal discussions and support with any technical digital issues until 10:20. A training session may run from 10:20-10:50; and then from 10:50 to 11:15 the trainer or facilitator will stay on the call to allow any follow up questions and informal conversation.

⁹ Digital Unite (2020) [How to download an iPhone app](#).

¹⁰ Digital Unite (2020) [How to download an Android app](#).

¹¹ Fox, C., '[Step-by-step guide: How to video call your family](#)', in BBC, 22 March 2020.

¹² Digital Unite (2020) [How to use FaceTime on iPhone and iPad](#).

¹³ GCFGlobal (2016) [Free Skype Tutorial at GCFGlobal](#).

¹⁴ GCFGlobal (2016) [Free WhatsApp Tutorial at GCFGlobal](#).

¹⁵ Digital Unite (2020) [Webcams](#).

¹⁶ Digital Unite (2020) [Facebook](#).

¹⁷ Facebook Messenger Help Centre (2021) [Sending Messages, Photos and Videos](#).

- More general sites such as [Learn My Way](#) provide a wider range of content. However, users who are very new to the internet may be overwhelmed by too much information. More specific, short-form guidance can be a useful place to begin signposting to.

How can you improve accessibility for service users and give them a better experience online?

It is essential to ensure digital services are accessible and that service users have a positive experience. Many of the groups at risk of digital exclusion outlined above may face difficulties getting online due to accessibility **barriers, including language, learning difficulties, and disabilities**. Others may be **anxious about using the internet, lack confidence** in their ability to get online, or be **concerned about online safety**.

For people experiencing **language barriers**:

- Get instructions or guides for using different tech (e.g. using Zoom) in a user's first language where possible. Some community groups have already produced [guides for Zoom in a variety of languages](#).¹⁸

For people with **learning difficulties**, the [Good Things Foundation](#)¹⁹ gives several recommendations on helping them get online:

- Consider different levels of independence in learning new digital skills. Some users may be able to work through online courses on their own, whereas others may need assistance with this and a longer period for learning about a new topic.
- In normal circumstances, it is helpful to provide paper copies of information, such as printable guidance for using devices, including images and diagrams. If requested, you could consider posting hard copies of information to users.
- Instructions should be clear, simple, and jargon-free.

For people with **disabilities**:

- [AbilityNet](#) is a useful resource for adjusting laptops and other devices for accessibility.

¹⁸ Jewish Council for Racial Equality and West London Welcome (2020) [Translated Guides to Zoom](#).

¹⁹ Good Things Foundation (2018) [Doing digital inclusion with the most excluded: People with Learning Disabilities](#).

- AbilityNet usually runs a free home visiting service, which they have converted to an online service, so people with disabilities can get support with getting online safely. For example, they recommend different methods of communication and taster sessions when working with people with hearing or cognitive disabilities.

For people who are **anxious about using the internet** or **do not understand how it can be helpful** for them:

- [The Good Things Foundation's report](#)²⁰ has advice on engaging older people in digital exclusion and the tips may be useful for a wide range of service users. For example, it can be useful to relate services to the user's personal needs or interests, to make sure they understand how the digital service can help them. By learning to use Zoom to talk to a staff member, they can also put those skills to use when contacting friends and family.

For people **concerned about online safety**, there are a variety of resources online to increase awareness of good internet safety practices and to make people feel safe getting online:

- [SafeSurfing](#) provides information on internet safety specifically for people with learning disabilities.
- [Thinkuknow](#) has internet safety advice for children.
- [Age UK](#)²¹ provide information on online safety for older people.
- [Digital Unite](#)²² have a general guide to online safety and email safety tips.

For people who **lack confidence in their abilities**, it is important to:

- Be encouraging and allow users enough time to feel comfortable using technology.
- If possible, have users who have benefitted from using digital services share their experience with those who might be nervous to encourage them.
- Be patient and make sure those struggling to get online are rewarded with a positive experience that increases their confidence.

Other tips shared by BCF grant-holders include:

²⁰ Good Things Foundation (2018) [Doing digital inclusion with the most excluded: Older People](#).

²¹ Age UK (2020) [Staying safe online](#).

²² Digital Unite (2019) [Email safety tips](#).

- Keep online activities as simple as possible.
- Begin by contacting service users through a means they are familiar with, e.g. phone calls.
- Develop a 'buddy' system to encourage peer-to-peer learning.
- Provide phone support and talk people through the process (e.g. have a 'run through' before online group calls); be patient and expect to offer the same guidance multiple times.
- Reassure people that it is normal to have technical difficulties.
- Allow time before sessions for service users to sign in, so you can provide technical help.

Summary of tips for getting started

Start by identifying if any of your users are particularly at risk of digital exclusion.

Ask your users what is preventing them from getting online and involve them in the service design process and testing process. You can find more guidance and resources about this in [Section 1](#) (Digital delivery).

Signpost and connect users with resources that can help them if the help they need is outside of the scope of your service.

Ensure digital services are accessible to your target groups, applying and building on the tips in this section.

3. Safeguarding

How can you safeguard during a crisis? Should you update your policies? How should you think about online safety with regards to digital delivery?

In general, safeguarding policies should not need to undergo substantial changes for remote delivery, but they may need adaptations to cover changes in delivery.

It is particularly important to have a section covering any updated policies as a result of changes to working practices, such as moving to online provision. Check in with staff to make sure they understand and are comfortable with any changes, and that they have a clear route for dealing with safeguarding issues. Make sure staff and service users are clear on the boundaries of your service and what help can or cannot be offered.

How can you minimise risks when using online software?

There are risks associated with delivering online services. It is worth bearing these tips in mind:

- Consider enabling security features on platforms like Zoom. You can reduce the risk of hacking by setting a password for video calls and enabling a 'waiting room' feature to check who is joining a call before letting them in.
- If possible, ensure all online conversations are moderated and that staff understand reporting and blocking procedures of any online platforms you are using.
- Be mindful of platforms like WhatsApp where all group members can access phone numbers. Make sure users understand the associated risks before agreeing to use a certain platform and that they know how to leave a group or block users if required.
- Ensure that you have a reporting procedure in place in case of a security breach that might compromise the service users' information. To prevent a security breach, it is important to make any online systems you use to collect or store confidential information as secure as possible, such as by using two-factor authentication for staff to log in.

- As with any in-person delivery, keep data sharing to a minimum, only store essential information, and use a secure system. You should also ensure your service users are aware of and consent to any collection of personal or sensitive data. Creating a risk assessment can be a useful way to identify and manage risks. [London Youth](#)²³ have created a helpful template based on using Zoom with young people that can be adapted to suit your needs.

How can you protect children, young people, or other vulnerable service users online?

Much of what you should consider when working with vulnerable groups will be similar to in-person sessions. However, some adaptations may be needed, for example:

- Collecting parental consent for children and young people in an online format. You can use online tools such as [YotiSign](#) to collect electronic signatures.
- Make sure staff and volunteers recognise the signs of online abuse or harm. [The NSPCC](#)²⁴ provides a useful starting point for this. Their advice covers types and signs of online abuse and includes resources on what to do if a child discloses online abuse.
- Staff should use work accounts rather than personal accounts to communicate with service users. For example, you should create an organisational Facebook account rather than message users with staff personal Facebook accounts.
- Check the age-restrictions, and appropriateness, of any platforms you are using with children and young people. For example, Facebook can only be used by those aged 13+.

All these adaptations aim to protect children, young people, or other vulnerable services users from potential abuse, as well as promoting clear boundaries between staff and volunteers.

²³ Ritchie, L., Alidoro, M. and Bristol-Robinson, N. (2020) [Five practical points as you rapidly adapt your activities to the online world](#). London Youth.

²⁴ NSPCC (2019) [Online abuse](#).

How are young people and the youth sector responding to Covid-19?

It can be difficult to keep on top of changes that are happening for young people and in the youth sector. Various surveys and research projects have been launched to keep track of this, which have been summarised by the [NYA Research Hub](#).²⁵

These projects cover topics including how the Covid-19 pandemic is affecting young people's lives, the impact on youth organisations and the impact on young people's mental health.

This podcast from the [Centre for Science and Policy](#)²⁶ also explores the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on well-being.

What should staff and volunteers be aware of when running online sessions?

As well as adapting your safeguarding policy, some general tips for staff and volunteers include:

- Think about confidentiality and consider that some users may not want to be overheard or may be sharing devices between family members. Check with your users how they would prefer to be contacted. For example, they may prefer not to receive emails in between sessions if these can be read by members of their household.
- Maintain professional boundaries by ensuring you have a neutral background with no personal items (such as family photos) or anything that identifies where you live. Be presentable and wear your uniform if you have one.
- Learn how to use the privacy settings and reporting functions of any platforms you use. This is essential for dealing with any complaints quickly and safely.
- Clearly identify any third-party staff who have access to online delivery systems. Give clear guidance on accessing sensitive data.
- Oversee who has administrative roles on different platforms, and make sure all administrative staff receive appropriate training and support for running an online system.

²⁵ NYA Research Hub (2020) [A list of surveys during Covid-19 with data available](#).

²⁶ Doubleday, R., Blakemore, S.J. and Ramchandani, P., [Science, Policy & Pandemics: Episode 6—How has the pandemic impacted children and adolescents?](#), Podcast for the Centre for Science and Policy, 1 May 2020.

When live streaming, have a second member of staff act as a moderator to remove or challenge comments.

- Have a clear process for monitoring who is accessing the system, tracking attendance, and overseeing user activity. This can provide a record of activity if a safeguarding issue is disclosed. If appropriate, keep a record of scheduled and completed online sessions.
- Set ground rules for features such as screen sharing, file sharing, and webcams. If you work with vulnerable groups, make sure you have explicit consent to use these features before you start any session.
- Agree behavioural standards with participants, especially when working with young people, and hold everyone (including staff) accountable to them.

The following resources provide more detailed information for safeguarding children and young people online:

- [Safeguarding young people during the Covid-19 pandemic](#)²⁷ available at [Youth Work Support](#).
- This [video from OnSide](#)²⁸ provides lots of tips about engaging online and includes an informative slot on safeguarding from Lynn Byrne, OnSide's Safeguarding Manager (13:26-18:00 min)
- The [Keeping Children Safe Online](#)²⁹ report from NPC, Nominet and Parent Zone.

The BCF grant-holders have also shared the following lessons with us during our research:

- Use 'closed' Facebook groups and monitor all posts through an administrator account before they are shared.
- Email service users 'confidentiality statements' for online meetings in advance and reinforce them by reading them out at the start of the session.

²⁷ Burke, T., Cooke, C. and King, I. (2020) [Safeguarding young people during the Covid-19 pandemic: A guide for designated safeguarding leads in voluntary youth organisations](#). Youth Work Support.

²⁸ Byrne, L. and Griffin, D., [An OnSide Talent Academy Masterclass: How to connect positively with young people online](#), Video for OnSide, 15 May 2020.

²⁹ Green, A., Wilkins, C. (2019) [Keeping children safe online](#), NPC.

- Train staff running group sessions to read body language in a digital setting to understand non-verbal cues, this is critical where limited privacy at home will mean service users are not able to speak freely (such as people at risk of domestic violence).
- Create 'safe spaces' for users to engage. Facilitators should establish ground rules for confidentiality, openness, and bringing people into the conversation. Make sure users are aware of privacy settings and features including display names and turning their video on and off.

4. The effectiveness of digital interventions

What does the evidence say about digital and online interventions reducing loneliness?

There is emerging evidence to suggest that some traditionally in-person activities can be effective in tackling loneliness when transferred online (Figure 3). Activities shown to help reduce loneliness include providing access to **hardware**, **befriending**, **therapy** sessions, and **online support communities**. However, some findings suggest that technology-based interventions may exacerbate a sense of social isolation if they are not designed in an accessible way.³⁰

What kinds of online activity have been shown to reduce loneliness?

Different organisations have trialled different online ways of reducing loneliness (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Examples of different online activity types that tackle loneliness and improve well-being.

Type of activity	Examples	Effect on Loneliness
Providing access to hardware	WaveLength was set up in 1939 to connect bed-bound people with the outside world via radio. Today they provide devices to individuals and groups at risk of isolation.	Presenting at an event held by the Campaign to End Loneliness , ³¹ WaveLength reported that their service users experienced a statistically significant decrease in social and emotional loneliness by engaging with technology. You can read more in their own research reports . ³²

³⁰ Victor, C., Mansfield, L., Kay, T., Daykin, N., Lane, J., Grigsby Duffy, L., Tomlinson, A. and Meads, C. (2018) [An overview of reviews: the effectiveness of interventions to address loneliness at all stages of the life-course](#). What Works Wellbeing.

³¹ Campaign to End Loneliness (2019) [Can digital technology help tackle loneliness?](#)

³² WaveLength (2019) [Reports](#).

<p>Online counselling and therapy</p>	<p>There are many apps and platforms for professional support online. These range from self-management apps to e-therapy and crisis help.</p> <p>Togetherall is an e-therapy app that places users into an anonymous online community, where they can connect with others, access professional support, and set goals to track their progress.</p>	<p>This study from the University of Haifa³³ found that ‘a comparison between face-to-face and internet intervention as reported on in 14 of the studies revealed no differences in effectiveness.’</p>
<p>Befriending</p>	<p>Age UK’s Call in Time³⁴ is a national telephone befriending service based on a corporate volunteering model. Organisations that sign up allow their staff to volunteer for half an hour a week to befriend an older person.</p>	<p>An independent evaluation³⁵ of the pilot phase of the project found that ‘perceived well-being and mood improved and activity levels increased among telephone befriending service recipients, including those suffering from chronic depression. Many reported a reduction in loneliness.’</p>
<p>Small online communities</p>	<p>No Isolation connects older people with friends and family through technology.</p> <p>The University of Surrey conducted a small-scale study into ‘slow social media’, in which only three people are part of the online social network, rather than interactions being ‘one-to-many’ and daunting.</p>	<p>No Isolation has found that increased digital contact can lead to an increase in offline meetings and a general strengthening of relationships.</p> <p>The University of Surrey’s study suggested that sharing personal, meaningful content with a small audience could improve feelings of connection between online users.</p> <p>All these findings were presented during an event hosted by the Campaign to End Loneliness.³⁶</p>

³³ Barak, A., Hen, L., Boniel-Nissim, M. and Shapira, N. (2008) ‘[A Comprehensive Review and a Meta-Analysis of the Effectiveness of Internet-Based Psychotherapeutic Interventions](#)’. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 26(2-4): pp.109-160.

³⁴ Age UK (2016) [Call in Time](#).

³⁵ Cattan, M., Kime, N.H. and Bagnall, A. (2008) [Low-level support for socially isolated older people: An evaluation of telephone befriending](#). Age UK.

³⁶ Campaign to End Loneliness (2019) [Can digital technology help tackle loneliness?](#)

<p>Large online communities</p>	<p>Side by Side is a digital peer support community managed by Mind. It provides an online space for people to share experiences and listen to others.</p>	<p>Since its inception (as Elefriends) in 2013, more than 86,000 people have signed up and evidence collected in Mind's impact report suggests it can be an effective way to reduce social isolation.³⁷</p>
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Some specific user groups may benefit more from online interventions. There is evidence that being connected online can be especially helpful in addressing loneliness for people who are **less physically mobile**. There is also evidence that using technology can help increase social interaction and promote enjoyment and relaxation for **people with dementia**.

[A review by the Early Intervention Foundation](#)³⁸ found that digital interventions can be as effective as in-person interventions when working with children and young people. These are more likely to be effective if they involve contact with a youth worker, rather than being purely self-directed. However, there is less evidence on how digital interventions affect long-term outcomes, and these interventions often see high drop-out rates, so keeping children and young people engaged in online interventions is key.

How can digital services be used to tackle loneliness most effectively?

- Tailor your content to specific audiences—ask them what they want, get a good understanding of their needs, and get them to help design the service if you can. (See [Sections 2](#) and [3](#)).
- If your service involves getting groups of service users together, try to connect users with those they share similarities with, to help them make easier connections. For example, those with shared interests.

³⁷ ASK4 (2017) [Well connected?: What role does technology play in combatting social isolation and loneliness in students?](#).

³⁸ Martin, J., McBride, T., Masterman, T., Sorgenfrei, M., Pote, I., Mokhtar, N. and Oprea, E. (2020) [Covid-19 and early intervention: Evidence, challenges and risks relating to virtual and digital delivery](#). Early Intervention Foundation.

5. Measurement and evaluation

How can you measure, evaluate and learn?

How can you adapt your approach to measurement and evaluation during a crisis?

A crisis is an opportunity to make the most of data and evidence. Traditional, in-depth outcome and impact measurement approaches (like the one NPC suggested in our initial BCF [guidance](#)³⁹) may not be possible, however, useful data includes:

- Data about **users' needs**.
- Data about the **reach of services**.
- **Feedback** from users about services.

Involving service users in adapting your measurement and evaluation processes can be useful to make sure that what is planned is practical and relevant (see [Sections 1](#) and [2](#) for more on engaging service users).

Why is measurement and evaluation important during a crisis? How can it help you with service delivery?

Data can help you to inform decision-making around:

- How to best use **resources**, such as staff time and funding.
- How to best **deliver** programmes.
- How to make your services as **useful** to users as possible.

Data can help you decide how to deliver services, keep services appropriate in a rapidly changing context, and adapt services to suit the needs of your users. Many of these decisions may involve new considerations for you.

³⁹ Kazimirski, A. and Man, M. (2019) [Building Connections Fund: Guidance on evaluation for grant-holders](#). NPC.

In April 2020, BCF grant-holders discussed the challenges they were facing when considering their service delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic. These questions included:

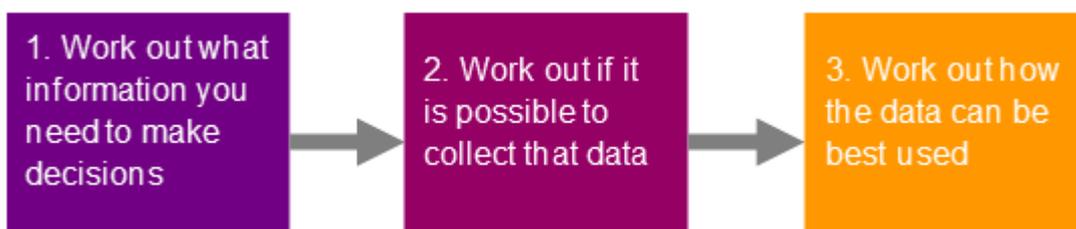
- How has the pandemic changed which groups might need support?
- How can we understand user needs without face-to-face conversations?
- How can we make services accessible (e.g. for non-English speakers or for people who may not be able to use technology or not want to)?
- What's the best way to get feedback from communities?
- What's the best way to transfer more physical / active services, such as exercise sessions, to a digital context?
- How should we avoid duplication with other services?
- How should we identify gaps in provision?

While your own considerations may be different, all organisations will be able to draw on data to help answer service delivery questions.

NPC's three steps for adapting your monitoring and evaluation approach in a crisis

Here we offer a step-by-step process for thinking about what kind of data and evaluation work you can carry out in a crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

When deciding on your approach to measurement and evaluation, you can start with these three steps:



Step 1: What information do you need to make decisions?

The first step in planning your approach to evaluation is working out **what information you need** to make decisions. This involves:

1. **Considering the [5 types of data](#)** and how they can help you (Figure 4). By collecting these types of data, you can better understand what you are doing differently during the crisis, what is and isn't working, and what can be learned from this.
2. **Identifying key questions** that you need answered to make decisions. For example, you might need to consider:
 - **How your users' needs or demand for resources have changed?** What are the key issues users are raising during their contact with staff? Do some groups have different issues to others?
 - **Who isn't being reached by your service?** How many people are using services and how has this changed? How many are first-time users? Who might be falling through the gaps?
 - **What do users think about your service?** What difference is it making to them? Are there quick ways you could improve it?
3. **Prioritising** which questions matter most. Think about which questions need urgent answers and which will become important in the medium term.

You may find it helpful to prioritise collecting **user, engagement, and feedback** data. This data will be easier and quicker to collect and will be useful for short-term decision-making.

Figure 4: The [five types of data](#),⁴⁰ with some suggestions as to what questions this could help answer.

Types of data	What questions do you need answered? Some examples ...
1. User: The characteristics of the people or organisations you aim to reach.	Who would we normally reach that we aren't reaching now? Who are we reaching now that we normally don't? What issues do people need help with? How are these issues different to normal?

⁴⁰ Noble, J., '[Five types of data for assessing your work: An explainer](#)', in *New Philanthropy Capital*, 29 September 2017.

<p>2. Engagement: The extent to which people use your activities. How often? For how long?</p>	<p>How are people engaging with services and to what extent? How are new methods of reaching people changing how they engage?</p>
<p>3. Feedback: What users think about your service.</p>	<p>What do people think about the new activities and different methods of engagement? Do they like them? Do they find them useful? Which aspects work well? Which don't work well? How could these be improved?</p>
<p>4. Outcomes: Short-term changes or benefits that service users experience as a result of your activities.</p>	<p>What do we know / think about what short-term changes this will cause (intended / unintended)?</p>
<p>5. Impact: The long-term change that you want service users to achieve.</p>	<p>What difference do we think our outcomes will make to our long-term impact?</p>

Spotlight on theory of change

A theory of change helps you describe and connect the need you are trying to address, the changes you want to make (your outcomes), and what you plan to do (your activities).

If you have a theory of change from before the crisis, refer back to it and consider whether it's still reflective of your current delivery model.

If so, do the assumptions still hold true? You can test them out with research questions and data. For example, maybe your theory of change relied on users feeling listened to by staff. But do they still?

If your theory of change no longer reflects your delivery model, and you think you'll be working this way for a while longer, then you should consider creating a new one to try and understand how your new model is working, and then test that out. More help on developing a theory of change can be found in NPC's [Theory of change in ten steps](#).⁴¹

⁴¹ Noble, J. (2019) [Theory of change in ten steps](#). NPC.

Step 2: Is it possible to collect this data?

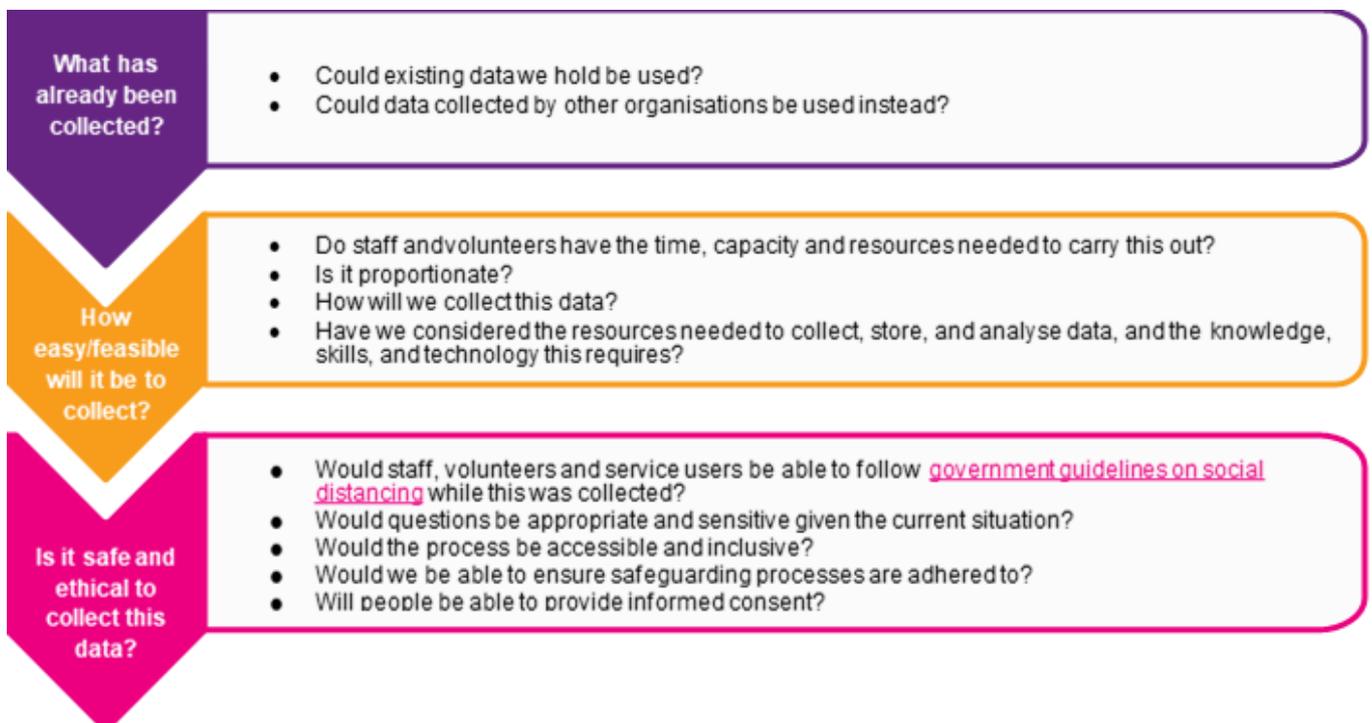
As well as thinking about what kind of data to collect and how to collect it, you also need to **consider whether this is appropriate or possible** (Figure 5). Ask yourselves these questions before starting any new data collection:

- **What is already being collected?** Do you already have this data or is it available elsewhere?
- **How easy will this be to collect?** Are there resources you can use to help plan your data collection? How will you collect it and **is this feasible?**
- Have you considered the **safety and ethics** of collecting this data?

As you adjust to the new circumstances and begin to think more systematically about your data collection, you may develop tools to help you better understand your service users and their needs.

Using these tools will help you build on ‘anecdotal’ insights you may already be collecting and gather more robust research data that can be used to compare between service users. Using research data can help you establish patterns and adapt your services to suit the needs of all your users.

Figure 5: The three key questions for assessing whether it’s possible to collect useful data.



It is vital to be **clear, open and honest** with users about what you will do with their information, why you need it and who it will be shared with, and to ensure any data is kept in a safe location.

[Inspiring Impact](#)⁴² sets out some further guidance on research ethics and data protection.

Make sure all data is collected and stored according to GDPR. For more information on data protection and your responsibilities, refer to the [Information Commissioner's Office](#)⁴³ website.

Once you have considered these three questions (Figure 5), you can start to plan what data you might need to collect if you can't rely on existing sources. Figure 6 illustrates how you might start to plan this.

Figure 6: Example of key questions, data that has been collected, and what else can be collected.

Types of data	What questions do you need answered? (Examples)	What has already been collected? (Examples)	What else could be collected? (Examples)
1. User: The characteristics of the people or organisations you aim to reach.	What are the key issues people need help with? Who are we not reaching?	Key issues noted individually from calls with service users. Registration of users from before the crisis included demographic data.	FAQs: Use call logs to tally up common topics, then ask staff to record this more consistently in the future. Restart collection of basic demographic details at registration: Share a simple online form in a similar format to previous forms to facilitate comparison and to look for gaps.
3. Feedback: What users think about your service.	What do people think about the new activities and different methods of engagement?	Casually asking people what they thought of sessions and asking them to let you know if they have any suggestions (no notes captured, just discussion).	More structure for end of session feedback: Develop 3-5 key questions you ask at the end of each session, make sure responses and feedback are documented and responded to. Arranging future feedback: At the end of calls, ask people if they'd be happy to be contacted again in a month to ask them anonymous questions about their experience.

⁴² Inspiring Impact (2020) [Research ethics and data protection: How can you follow ethical research principles, and store and protect data appropriately?](#)

⁴³ Information Commissioner's Office (2015). [Guide to Data Protection](#).

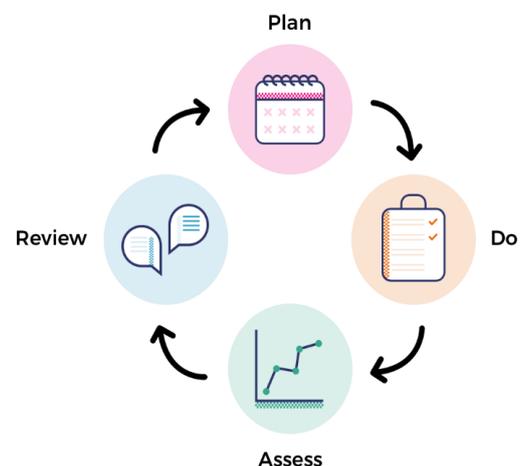
Step 3: What will you do with your data once collected?

Once you have collected your data, you will need to consider how to best make use of it, by [analysing](#)⁴⁴ and [interpreting](#)⁴⁵ your results and then **integrating data into delivery decisions**.

- When making delivery decisions, you are likely to be thinking about the **shorter term**: How will my team be working over the coming weeks? What kinds of activities will our users benefit from most? How can we adapt our existing services?
- Collecting, analysing, and interpreting your data can help you make these decisions. For example, you might realise that some activities that had seemed right to begin with could be improved. Are there target groups you feel you aren't reaching anymore? Are users not engaging as you had anticipated? Are you getting feedback from users suggesting things could be done differently?
- As you start thinking more **long term** about the way you deliver services, you should use data to help you learn and improve as you go along.

User, feedback, and engagement data can be useful for informing decision-making and improving service design and delivery on an ongoing, iterative basis. The Inspiring Impact **'plan', 'do', 'assess', 'review'** model is helpful here:

1. **Plan**:⁴⁶ Plan for how to create the desired effect. Clarify what you are trying to achieve, for whom, and why, and how data can help you understand this.
2. **Do**:⁴⁷ Collect data to gather insights.
3. **Assess**:⁴⁸ Assess data against key goals to draw conclusions about your activities.



⁴⁴ Inspiring Impact (2020) [Analyse your data: What's the best way to make sense of the data you've collected?](#)

⁴⁵ Inspiring Impact (2020) [Interpret your findings: Understanding what your data is telling you.](#)

⁴⁶ Inspiring Impact (2020) [Plan: Gain clarity on your goals, so you can decide what data to collect and determine whether your activities are creating the desired impact.](#)

⁴⁷ Inspiring Impact (2020) [Do: Collect the right data, so you can analyse and apply the findings to improve the impact of your programme or service.](#)

⁴⁸ Inspiring Impact (2020) [Assess: Analyse your qualitative and quantitative data to find patterns and themes, and draw conclusions about your impact.](#)

4. **Review:**⁴⁹ Use your findings to review, improve, and communicate your work.

The three steps we've described here map onto this framework and can help you adapt your services in a fast-changing environment. The first step (work out what information you need to make decisions) aligns with 'plan'; step two (work out if it is possible to collect that data) leads onto 'do' and step three (work out how the data can best be used) straddles both 'assess' and 'review'.

It might be helpful during a crisis to make these cycles very short, so that data can be gathered, learnt from, and changes implemented quickly. You could consider sending staff a weekly or fortnightly email briefing summarising the main insights gathered during the previous week around user needs, engagement, and feedback, so they can adapt their work accordingly.

It's important to continue to review and adapt your delivery as you go along. This will help you understand what insights you should be collecting. If the data stops being useful, or a question less important, you don't need to spend time on it anymore. Figure 7 illustrates how data could be gathered and used to inform delivery in both the short and long term, building on the example in Figure 6.

Figure 7: Example of key questions, and how data can inform delivery decisions.

Types of data	What questions do you need answered? (Examples)	Data collected (Examples)	Delivery decisions (Examples)
1. User: The characteristics of the people or organisations you aim to reach.	What are the key issues that people need help with? Who are we not reaching?	Key issues noted individually from calls with service users. FAQs: Topics from call logs and tallies of common issues. Registers of users from before the crisis. Improved demographic details of users, and records of the users who have and haven't engaged since the start of the crisis.	Send staff a weekly email briefing with top issues from the previous week and a reminder of key advice. Compare pre-crisis user data with new user data. Are there blind spots? Compare with others locally and reach out to underserved users. Consider how you can adapt your services to make it easier for those who you aren't reaching to access them.

⁴⁹ Inspiring Impact (2020) *Review: Once you know what your findings mean, use them to review and improve your work, and communicate your impact.*

<p>3. Feedback: What users think about your service.</p>	<p>What do people think about the new activities and different methods of engagement?</p>	<p>Informal feedback at the end of calls asking people what they thought of sessions.</p> <p>More structure for end of session feedback: Develop three to five key questions you ask at the end of each session, make sure responses are documented and replied to.</p> <p>Arranging future feedback: At the end of calls, you could ask people if they'd be happy to be contacted again in a month to ask them a couple of anonymous questions about their experience.</p>	<p>Review feedback periodically, tally up key themes, and check for possible improvements.</p>
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What is the difference between ‘anecdotal’ insights and research data?

Anecdotal insights: Insights collected in a casual or informal way. Not collected across all service users and typically not recorded systematically. Note, these are still insights and can be valuable, they just aren't necessarily representative of everyone's experiences. Examples of this include one-off comments given by users at the end of calls or emails.

Research data: Data collected in a systematic way, using tools that have been designed to help answer a specific question and can be assessed for quality by common standards (be aware, research data can vary in quality relating to the reliability and validity of data). The same tools are used to gather and record insights from service users, allowing for comparison and / or explanation. Examples include short surveys or topic guides for a focus group.

6. Additional resources

We hope you find the following additional resources helpful. We are not responsible for third party content. For more of our work on the Building Connections Fund, including our developmental evaluation and our guidance on co-design, head to thinkNPC.org/bcf.

1. Digital delivery

[Catalyst](#). A range of free resources and support from Catalyst, an initiative to increase the charity sector's engagement with digital, design and data. [Their free digital service redesign course](#) is a great starting point for anyone new to digital service design.

[Coffee Connections](#). An ongoing initiative from CAST to connect charities to learn about digital through peer learning.

[COVID-19: Digital Service Delivery for Charities](#). An open-source document containing case studies from a variety of charities who have moved to digital delivery.

[Introduction to Miro resources](#) and [Top tips for running remote workshops](#) provide info on remote delivery on NPC Labs, from the My Best Life Team.

[10 principles for design in a crisis](#). A blog by Lou Downe, outlining some top principles for digital delivery during a crisis.

2. Digital inclusion

[Blueprint for a 100% Digitally Included Nation](#). A report from the Good Things Foundation looking at the steps to increasing digital inclusion across the UK.

[Loneliness and digital inclusion](#). Useful information from Age UK on their learning around digital inclusion and loneliness.

[Online Centres Network's](#) page of digital resources, including resources that can help users of digital services to get online.

[Catalyst's flowchart](#) on choosing the right video conferencing software for your project.

[Crowdsourced digital signposting resources](#). A useful collection of resources and tools that can help those who are less familiar with tech, including links to guides on using a webcam, Skype, and video calling.

3. Safeguarding

[NSPCC's advice for online safety](#) for voluntary and community groups when working with children and young people.

[NCVO involving volunteers](#). Advice on working with volunteers during the Covid-19 pandemic, including information on safeguarding and who does and doesn't require a DBS check.

[Remote support: risk assessment and consent](#). This is a summary of guidance from the National Cyber Security Centre on the risks of online working, and includes example wording for getting consent from users accessing support services.

[New world, same rules: safeguarding and privacy](#). SCVO's blog post on adapting safeguarding practice in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

4. Monitoring and evaluation

[BetterEvaluation's response](#) to Covid-19, and the areas they are focusing on to support the evaluation community.

[NCVO's general advice](#) on managing impact during the Covid-19 pandemic.

[This blog from ChEW](#) about evaluation in the age of Covid-19 and [their tips](#) for updating funders on changes to projects.

[Blue Marble Evaluation's tips](#) on evaluation during the Covid-19 pandemic.

5. General tools and resources

[The Coronavirus Tech Handbook](#). A crowdsourced Google Doc with a wealth of resources on topics such as digital inclusion, running virtual events, and remote working support.

[10 tips to help your project reduce loneliness](#). NPC's top tips for organisations working to reduce loneliness.

[Befriending Networks](#) have a lot of downloadable resources. You can find tips, videos and training resources on their website.