Guidance for online safeguarding if you're working with vulnerable people

1. General guide

Choosing the right technology

Signing up to new software is a bit like moving into a new office. Please check the software in the same way that you might inspect a space for suitability. Is it safe? Does it have what you need?

We aren't able to endorse specific software or platforms, but here are some factors to bear in mind:

- Environmental sustainability: Whilst online meetings still seem to be more sustainable than in-person meetings, the more complex the systems and the more they rely on heavy data use (videos for example), the more energy is used. Streaming platforms in particular have a relatively high carbon footprint.

- Data use: How much data can you and the people you are working with afford? Some people have reliable broadband, some people rely on contracts or pay-as-you-go with mobile phone providers, which limit data use.
Consider whether you may be depriving people of data they could need for other things.
  - Consider the difference in data-use between software that relies on streaming video, software that uses images, and software that is mainly text-based.

- Accessibility:
  - how complex is the technology?
  - does it require downloading new software?
  - can it work on different phones as well as computers?
  - does the interface design support access for people with disabilities?

- Privacy:
You might feel that you have no choice about the software you are being asked to use. Bear in mind that if you have to use a software chosen by another organisation, you can often still change its settings to suit your needs. If you feel able, please also share feedback with your hosts if you are concerned about their use of a particular software – this is a new space for many people and we will need to learn from each other as we go!

Protecting data and privacy

As we start to work with software that connects us online, we can make our personal information vulnerable to other individuals. We do the same with information from other people we are encouraging to use the same software.

Some software is better than others in terms of passing our information from our personal computers accessible to businesses and individuals without our being aware. Before you start working online, consider the privacy and security rules relating to the software you are using, or being asked to use. Will you be sharing information publicly, or with the company who are running the software? Do you have options in the software's settings that can make your information and that of other people using the software more private?

You may want to consider using a "virtual private network" (VPN) at home. A VPN may make it harder for cyber criminals to access your computer and its stored data by using an untraceable network of servers.

Online meetings: hosting and participating
Hosting online meetings

Before the meeting:

• Does the software allow you a password option? If so, use it; this may help prevent unwanted access to your online meetings.

• Develop an agenda and a clear plan for managing the meeting. Bear in mind that – as with any meeting – the chair's role is to make sure everyone has a chance to participate.

- Consider in advance whether this is a formal or an informal meeting – this will have bearing on whether you need to set some ground rules at the beginning.

- Will you use an interactive format where everyone may be able to contribute, or a more webinar-style meeting that restricts who can speak?

- Consider asking people to mute their microphones when they're not speaking – this avoids interference and background noise, which can be distracting.

- How will you manage the conversation? Some technologies allow breakout rooms, and give you options as the host to mute people so that you can control how the conversation flows.

- In some meetings, particularly webinar-style or larger meetings, people may choose to join or leave at arbitrary points during the meeting; do you need to consider how to manage this?

- Do you need more than one person to manage the meeting? Some organisations are using a host 'buddy' to help manage questions and/or provide technical backup.

• Make sure you understand the technology you are using

- What data is stored from people attending meetings?

- How do the different meeting options work? Practise your plan with a colleague or on your own before you meet others.

• Decide whether you need to record or save anything from the meeting.

- Why are you recording? Is it for your personal notes? for sharing with others? for sharing publicly? How will people be identified if you share recordings?
- Bear in mind that you would not normally record every meeting.
- Consider whether as a participant you want to be recorded.
- Have a backup plan for taking notes in case participants don't want to be recorded.
- Will you be collecting any personal data (e.g. email addresses)?

• Think about the length of the meeting. Online meetings are often more tiring than offline meetings (partly because of the extra work you are having to do to process physical cues and body language). You will probably need to make the meeting shorter than an offline equivalent.

• Think about pacing the meeting, and how you can manage everyone's input so that it doesn't become chaotic, and so that everyone has a chance to contribute. A facilitator may need to be more robust than in an offline space to help people understand when they can speak.

• Consider how you might manage disruptive or distracting behaviours that result from people being in their home spaces – how might it affect your meeting if someone is constantly moving around on video, for example?

• Bear in mind that in some formats people might join at random times during the meeting;

How will you manage this?

• Think about where you are in your home, what you are wearing for the meeting etc.: what do you feel comfortable sharing about your life through what people can see? You might want to take down photographs of other people, for example. Consider whether you might prefer not to use video.

• Do you need to share your screen at any point? If so, don't forget to check that you aren't sharing emails or personal information by accident.

During the meeting:

• Explain how you are going to chair or host the meeting, explain the role of anyone else you are working with to manage the meeting, and share your agenda or plan.

• Make it clear

- whether you are recording or saving any chat pages, or keeping a record of personal data (e.g. email addresses);
- why you are recording or saving these things;
- what you will do with these recordings after the meeting.

• If participants prefer not to be recorded, be prepared to take notes instead; if you really have to record, offer participants the option to leave if they prefer.

- Consider explaining to participants what you will do if the technology fails; for example, that you will try to reconnect, but that if this fail repeatedly, you will contact participants to rearrange. Wifi and broadband can fail at the best of times, and are more likely to do so during high-traffic periods.
- Some people may prefer not being visible, or may not want to share images of their homes. Offer everyone the option to use audio only.
- Make sure you allow people to introduce themselves in an ordered way so that everyone in the space is acknowledged.
- It's a tricky time to be working at home for many people, especially those with caring responsibilities. Remain focused during the meeting as much as you can, but if you need to leave temporarily for any reason, explain what you are doing; absence of attention can be magnified in online spaces and can hamper open discussion.
- Make sure you finish the meeting properly so that everyone has a sense of closure.

Participating in online meetings

Before the meeting:
- Make sure you understand the technology you are about to use
- Have you downloaded any necessary software?
- Do you feel comfortable using the software? If you are concerned about privacy or data breaches, you should feel free to contact the host of the meeting about your concerns, or withdraw from the meeting as necessary.
- Make sure you know how to switch your audio and video on and off during the meeting so that you can control your own participation and how much you share
- If you don't understand what's happening technically during the meeting, ask the host
- Consider whether you would be happy to be recorded during the meeting
- Think about where you are in your home, what you are wearing etc.: what do you feel comfortable sharing about your life through what people can see? Consider whether you might prefer not to use video.

During the meeting:
- If the host doesn't make it clear whether they are recording or saving any chat pages, feel free to check this with them.
- If you prefer not being visible, use audio only.
- It's a tricky time to be working at home for many people, especially those with caring responsibilities. Remain focused during the meeting as much as you can, but if you need to leave temporarily for any reason, try to explain what you are doing as soon as you can. Absence of attention can be magnified in online spaces and can hamper open discussion.

2. Safeguarding and your duty of care

The existing safeguarding policies for children and vulnerable adults apply in the digital space.

Before you start planning, can you answer 'yes' to these questions?

- Do you or your commissioner have robust safeguarding policies and procedures in place? Do you know how to use them?
- Have you considered your own and your participants' level of IT literacy? You may need to blur backgrounds, avoid showing family photos on walls etc., and make sure you consider GDPR if you are screen sharing (avoid having emails open etc).
- Does the software you're using hide other people's contact details with the other users who are on a group call at the same time? Do you risk giving away individuals personal contact details?

Setting up and running meetings or group sessions

For general guidance on setting up and running online meetings, refer to the guidance above. In addition to this, you might want consider the following:

- How might you organise some supervision (including peer supervision) for yourself?
- Sessions may be more tiring online than in person. You are likely to be able to do less than you might expect to face-to-face (this is not a failure of facilitation!)
- Remember that many platforms are designed with data (rather than human beings) in mind and have all sorts of functionality which is superfluous or might exclude people. Ask yourself whether you really need to use functions such as chat, slide-sharing, or voting just because they're there.
- Spend a period at the start of the session (as you would offline) establishing an agreement for how you will work together. By having a loose contract with participants that everyone can add to, you will be establishing a culture of trust and safety. Consider whether it is appropriate for confidentiality to be agreed between participants, for example. Inviting people to share only what they feel comfortable with, for example, signals that it is not expected that participants share personal or emotionally sensitive information about themselves.
- It is especially important that you fully understand the software you are using
- to choose software that meets your participants needs and does not create additional anxiety about learning new skills or expending unnecessary data
- to protect the privacy of your group's members
- to support your ability to facilitate with confidence

- Does your software enable participants to 'direct message' each other without the host being able to see the messages? If so, you may want to consider disabling this option, which could limit your ability to safeguard participants.
- During challenging or stressful times, it may be more appropriate to build in check-in time for participants to report on how they're feeling. This is supportive at both the beginning and end of sessions. Try not to squeeze out this reflective space due to other activities running on. Reflective time at the end of a session in particular helps ground us and give a sense that we have engaged, been recognised and listened to.
- Consider too how you might or might not follow-up after the session with the participants.
- Think about what reflective practice you can build in for yourself; can you write notes after the session? Is there someone you can debrief with?

Facilitators have a duty of care to look after the needs of the whole group. We need to think what our response will be if a participant joins an online group in a state of undress, eating and drinking, on their bed, playing with pets and children, or behaving antisocially, for example. People suddenly leaving a group, or getting up and leaving the room might be irritating or even quite triggering for some participants. Likewise with distracting notifications or sounds in the environment. We may need to establish and uphold boundaries more robustly than we would in person – something that might be quite challenging for some of us. The rule of thumb is to apply the norms and principles you would in person and to use common sense.