GOING DIGITAL

A beginner's guide to adding online support to your young people's mental health and wellbeing service

YOUTH ACCESS

Championing advice and counselling

Youth Access

Online

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Introduction

This guide has arisen out of the DigiTalk project, a one year Health Education England funded programme, which aimed to increase the capacity of 15 local Youth Information, Advice and Counselling Services (YIACS) to provide an online counselling service.

Part of the project involved the service managers of the organisations regularly meeting to share knowledge and learning throughout their journeys. This guide has been produced as a result, so that other providers can benefit from their experiences.

Please note that this is not a fool-proof guide to designing and implementing an online service. Each local area and service will be different: with its own set of individual needs and challenges. We do hope however, that it will offer a good starting point in your thinking around an online offer.

We would like to give a special thank you to Off the Record in Croydon, who very generously shared their knowledge, experience and online platform with the rest of the group, and without whom the project, and this guide, would not exist.

Before you begin

Online counselling - why bother?

Entering into the world of online counselling can seem daunting, especially to a small organisation with a stretched team and limited resources. Setting up and running a safe, well-managed online service is highly resource intensive, especially at the start of the journey. So why bother?

Young people are already online

Young people are not scared of the internet. This generation have grown up using it as a normal part of their everyday lives. They know how to use it, and they are comfortable with it, much more so than most adults. They will be using it to find support whether local services are there or not.

You will be able increase access to different groups of young people

We have found that those young people accessing an online counsellor normally won't convert into face-to-face counselling and vice-versa. This is why we recommend that online counselling should be offered as part of a range of available options to young people, not as a replacement to face-to-face support.

An online counselling offer will make your service more accessible to young people who struggle to get through the door for whatever reason - physical disability, lack of transport or cultural stigma are just some of the reasons.

Strategically, it will help your service

Many Local Transformation plans have identified money for online services. This shows that commissioners are increasingly interested in developing a digital offer for their local area. Commissioners are working towards the targets outlined in the Five Year Forward Plan, which includes increasing IAPT coverage. If your online service can fit into this, it could improve your standing with local strategic partners, as well as offering an important service to young people in your area.

Ensure organisational buy-in

It is likely that you will experience some level of resistance to the development of online counselling amongst staff. Counsellors trained, experienced and comfortable working face to face may find this a challenging medium to work with. Make sure you factor in time to consult with your counselling team, find out what their worries are and to try and address them. Reassure your team that this is adding to your overall offer, and not replacing face-to-face counselling. If you do not get buy-in from your counsellors, the online service will be doomed from the start.

Most importantly, give yourself plenty of time to plan and set up the service before committing to a launch date. This guide will help you to begin the process.

Your digital checklist

Use the below checklist to begin thinking about how you start your online journey. The rest of this guide aims to help you think through each step in more detail.
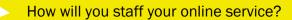
Safeguarding and managing risk online:

▶ Have you considered what the possible risks are?

▶ What are the relevant regulations and legislation in this area? Are you up to date?

▶ Have you developed relevant policies? How will they integrate into your existing service?

The practicalities:

▶ How will you staff your online service?

▶ How will you collect the necessary data from young people?

Choosing the right platform:

▶ What features do you require from the online platform?

▶ What security features and IP agreements will need to be implemented?

▶ What is your budget? Is it realistic?

Developing safe online communities for young people

▶ What are the advantages and disadvantages of running online communities for young people?

▶ What are the practicalities of this?

▶ Should your service be using social media?

Safeguarding and managing risk online

Although the online world can seem daunting and full of potential pitfalls, young people are already there. So how do we overcome our own fears to create a safe online space that allows us to reach and support more young people?

The key to planning anything online is good preparation. Give yourself plenty of time to consider the possible risks, to produce robust policies for an online service, and to properly train your frontline staff. Below are our top three areas to consider when thinking about this process.

1. Consider possible risks

A counselling session held online is in a far less contained environment than that held in a face-to-face setting. John Suler's Primary Factors in the Psychology of Cyberspace (see fig.1) highlights ways in which the online session may encourage feelings of fantasy and not being 'real'. This could lead to several situations that your organisation needs to plan for.
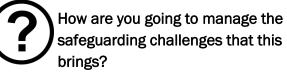
The Disinhibition Effect

The anonymity of the internet can cause people to act with less restraint than they would in a normal face-to-face session. A client may end up saying more than they intend to early in the relationship and this can lead to an increase in the pace of disclosures.

? How is the online environment of less restraint going to be managed by your organisation?

Black hole effect

A client disappearing without warning, especially after a disclosure, is a challenging situation that may arise during a session. This can be a form of acting out, a way of avoiding, or it can be entirely accidental. It can be very distressing for the counsellor, and raises safeguarding issues.

Guidelines must be very clear for the young person taking part in the online counselling session. They need to know that you will take safeguarding steps as normal if a disclosure is made.

? How are you going to manage the safeguarding challenges that this brings?

Fig. 1 Suler's Primary Factors in the Psychology of Cyberspace:

Dissociative Anonymity	'You Don't Know Me'
Invisibility	'You Can't See Me'
Solipsistic Introjection	'It's All In My Head'
Dissociative Imagination	'It's Just a Game'
Asynchronicity	'See You Later'
Minimising Authority	'We're Equals'

2. Make sure your you are up to date with any relevant regulations and legislation

The British Association of Psychotherapy and Counselling (BACP) updated their guidelines for online counselling in 2015. These should be used in conjunction with the 2009 BACP online guidelines (third edition) and are a good place to start when considering ethical and regulatory frameworks.

If you or your organisation are a member of a different regulatory body, it is worth consulting the guidance they currently produce for online practice. You can also contact ACTO (the Association of Counselling and Therapy Online) who offer membership and support to therapists and organisations committed to trained, ethical online therapy.

The implementation of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) in February 2016 is also relevant to this area. You can download the ICO's easy to read guide on this here
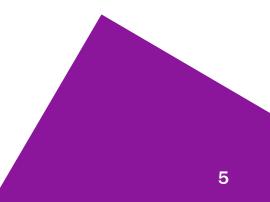
? Ask yourself:

- What regulations and legislation needs to be taken into account?

- What is your current practice in this area (i.e. your 'offline practice')

- What internal policies and procedures do you need to put in place?

- When does this need to be done by?

3. Develop relevant policies and integrate into your existing face-to-face service

It would be helpful to review and further develop the following for your online service:

- Data protection policy

- Confidentiality policy

- Online service risk policy

- Counselling agreement

- Out of service hours / out of area risk management policy

Remember: The more prepared your staff are before 'going live', the less daunting these situations will feel if/when they arise. We have included some example scenarios in the appendices of this document (p. 13) to get you thinking about what you need to consider when planning your policies.

The practicalities

After you have carefully thought through your policies and procedures, it is time to start considering the practicalities of your online service.

1. Staffing your online service

Co-ordination/Management

An online service will require a high amount of coordination and management from the outset. At launch time, the project will be particularly staff resource intensive, and a new digital project is likely to attract attention. Because of this, you will need a project lead with both technical and clinical skill sets. An ideal project lead will have:

- A passion for digital
- Strong technical knowledge and understanding
- Strong clinical understanding
- Time to drive development forward

Counsellors

The virtual nature of an online role means there is the option to recruit counsellors in any location. However, you will need to manage the challenges of home working and isolation that this may bring

Online counsellors require a specialist set of clinical skills. Those with only face to face training and experience will need additional training to transfer to an online platform. It may not be suitable for everyone. Similarly, specialist supervision is required for your online clinicians, which can also be carried out remotely. It is helpful to use a mixture of one-to-one and group supervision sessions to foster a sense of identity and build support within an online team. This is especially important if some of your team are working remotely.

Management factors to consider:

- A team of online counsellors working from home reduces pressure on physical space, but will put more pressure on IT infrastructure and competence
- They will need initial high levels of management & strong team communication
- Online counselling is just as time-intensive as face-to-face

Peer facilitators

If you are going to be running online group sessions with young people, peer facilitators are a good way of involving young people in content development and workshop delivery. This helps to:

- Keep content fresh and relevant
- Keep the 'chat' moving freely
- Offer an additional 'pair of eyes' to spot any concerns

BUT

- Needs relevant training and on-going support
- May 'trigger' peer facilitators own distress (particularly for ex-service users)
- Requires regular recruitment

The Rota

When you have all your staff in place, a rota will have to be worked out to allow a good amount of coverage time across the week. As well as usual working hours, some counsellors and management should be available during evening and weekends to ensure response times.

2. Data

Any online counselling service will require new clients to fill in some sort of registration form. It is important to carefully consider what data you want to collect from young people before they can register. The table below will help start your thinking.

Advantages of good data collection	Disadvantages of collecting data
Good data increases your ability to effectively manage safeguarding/risk concerns	Too much form filling may cause young people to switch off and may reduce service access
Access to data increases your ability to monitor and prove the effectiveness of the service	Data is only useful if you have time to analyse it
	More data collection = more site complexity = more cost
	Changes in data collection are not straightforward and can be costly

Data and commissioners

Online is new and so there may be a tendency for commissioners to want lots of data. Try to get it right from the beginning as changes to data collection after a platform has been developed can be time consuming and costly:

- Manage commissioner's expectations – help them to understand the issues of collecting data online and the impact of too much data collection on service uptake

- Agree KPIs in advance and in writing and stress that these can't be easily changed later

- If your commissioner has a key issue or concern to monitor, then build it in from the start

- If your online data needs to link to another system, then talk this through with developers at the outset

Measuring outcomes online

There are several things to consider when deciding which Routine Outcome Measures (ROMS) to use for your online counselling offer:

- Keeping measures consistent with your face-to-face measures will give you the ability to compare across services and keep data consistent

- Measures also need to be appropriate for an online context e.g. the ESQ (formally CHI ESQ) is designed for a face to face service only currently.

- Length of measure/ease of completion online needs to be taken into account – long, complex or multiple measures are likely to be off-putting to young people and may not be accurately completed

- When/how you want measures to be implemented? In advance? Sent by counsellors or automated?

Once embedded in the site, measures can be complex/costly to change, so try to get it right at the beginning.

Choosing the right platform

When you are ready to begin building your platform for online counselling, it is important to find a developer who can dedicate the time to understanding your needs and your organisation.
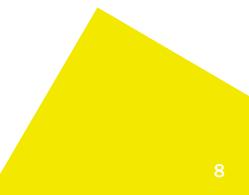
1. Features of an online service

The following features are worth considering when thinking about your online platform:

- **One-to-one counselling functionality**: A secure, confidential 'email' or 'instant message' exchange between counsellor and client with built in email/text reminders for booked sessions and the ability to attach outcome forms such as CORE/SDQ

- **Group 'Webinars' functionality** (if planning to carry out online group work): Schedule and deliver group webinars, a mixture of group discussion, slides and interactive activities. There are many different platforms that already exist to meet this function which your developer can 'plug in' to your platform.

- **Mobile Friendly:** This is essential for any online service supporting young people.

- **Content management system:** A good platform will provide you with the flexibility to independently manage content and create pages

- **Data Export:** The ability to pull off the data as a csv or xlsx file, so that you can integrate online and face-to-face data and provide reports for funders. Spend time thinking about what you will need to report on and how this can be built into the system.

2. Security and IP agreements

During discussions with your chosen developer, make sure you ask them about security and IP agreements (i.e. who will 'own' the finished site). For example, the Off the Record SkyLine platform has the following security and privacy features:

- Sensitive data is stored securely, on EU servers complying with the highest data protection standards

- All information 'in transit' is encrypted between counsellors and clients

- Different access levels prevent unauthorised access to data. Additional security can also be implemented, such as two-factor authentication

3. Set a realistic budget

You will need to budget not only for the initial build and set up of the platform, but also ongoing server hosting and any licensing fee. To keep costs manageable during set up, ensure that you have thought through carefully what you want and briefed the developers fully. Be aware that additional requirements may incur additional costs later in the programme. Make sure that you try to 'future-proof' your platform as much as possible, so that it does not become too costly. Things to consider may be:

- Integrating with your existing system/website for single user logins

- Interacting with third party reporting systems

- Ability to add your own outcome measures or other questionnaires

How much should I budget for building and maintaining an online counselling platform?

The answer to this question can vary a great deal, depending on who will be building your platform and what your specifications are. Stages to consider when gathering quotes may include:

- Budgeting for the initial brief and build, including developer and staff time. Don't underestimate the amount of staff time that is likely to be needed for agreeing the initial brief, liaising with developers and testing the early versions of the site

- Any additional branding costs that you may incur

- Try to build in some budget for any unexpected changes or set-backs

- Make sure you include ongoing annual costs - including any equipment, server hosting, licence costs, marketing and technical support

Developing safe online communities for young people

Facilitating online communities for young people can greatly complement online one-to-one counselling. It can also offer an anonymous and supported way for ex-service users to 'give back' to the organisation.

When discussing online communities in this guide, we are referring to either psycho-educational workshops, other online workshops, peer-to-peer support or sharing.

1. Advantages and disadvantages of online communities

Advantages	Disadvantages
Young people are already online	Building an online group can take a lot of time and resource
Improved access for young people who may not be able to access your face-to-face service	Members of a group may not always be able to relate to each other's experiences
Reduced isolation- young people can speak to like-minded peers, helping them to feel they are not alone in their problems	Group dynamics can be challenging to manage
A sense of belonging and ownership- especially for those young people who are trained to as peer facilitators	Staff may not have the relevant skills or online experience
The value of peer-to-peer support and of being able to share experiences and advice online	Some young people may be better off with one-to-one support and may not be confident enough to speak up in a group situation
Less intimidating than face-to-face groups	It can sometimes be difficult to measure impact online where young people come for a one off intervention
A potential first step to support which may improve access to one-to-one work	

2. Things to consider when setting up an online group

- Make sure you have enough peer mentors who are willing to facilitate the groups. Always have more than one facilitator per group as this will help manage any difficult situations

- Have a training and induction package for any peer facilitators to ensure they are fully prepared and are properly supported (You can access the Youth Access' online training developed by The Mix [here](#))

- Careful planning is needed. Make sure each session is thought through in advance

- Have a plan for when things happen, i.e. someone suddenly going offline

- When recruiting for a session, be careful of group size. Too many people in a large group can be difficult to manage

- It is important to carefully pace the sessions, and to be aware of how things come across online

3. Social media

It seems obvious for a service aimed at young people, and offering online counselling, to have a presence on social media- but make sure you are doing it for the right reasons! As with everything, you will need a good strategy and someone to implement it. A badly thought out and poorly resourced social media platform will at best be a waste of time, and at worst be detrimental to your organisation's reputation. Ask yourself:

- What will you be offering on social media and what won't you be offering?

- Does your service already have social media channels?

- What has worked well and why?

- What is not working well and why?

- What do you want to achieve by using social media?

- Who will have the responsibility of running the new social media channel?

Remember, when using social media you need to be clear who your audience is, and what you are offering before you start posting anything.

A note on convincing commissioners

The ease with which you are able to secure funding for your online counselling service from commissioners will vary greatly depending on a variety of factors. The experience of YIACS already commissioned to offer suggests the following may be helpful:

An established relationship: This is the number one reason why a commissioner will be tempted to fund your online service. A history of delivery, trust and accountability really counts when approaching them.

Being part of a local strategic partnership such as the Single Point of Access (SPA) is also attractive to commissioners. An established escalation pathway and a professional recognition of risk across partners can help alleviate safeguarding concerns.

Provide evidence and examples of how your organisation already manages risk within your face-to-face service. Also, show that you have done the groundwork around managing online risk. This shows the commissioner that you have thought seriously about it.

As one commissioner who has already commissioned an online service through their local YIACS says:

"Look at how your online service fits with the IAPT model. Commissioners want to buy to increase IAPT coverage in line with the Five Year Forward View. We are obsessed with the Five Year Forward View and hitting those targets! We are interested in any creative ways of helping us do that"

Appendix: safeguarding scenarios

The following scenarios will provide a helpful way for your organisation to start thinking about how it would manage risk and safeguarding issues. Get you team together to work through the scenarios below.

For each of these scenarios, answer these two questions:

1. What are your concerns and/ or further questions for the counsellor?
2. What is your next course of action?

Scenario 1

You are on call as safeguarding officer for your online youth counselling service. A counsellor contacts you regarding a 17 year old new site user with whom they were completing an initial assessment. The counsellor reports that the client was very keen to have counselling, saying they 'really needed to talk' about their self-harm. The young person tells the counsellor they are 'really scared it is out of control – I need help!!!' after this, they answer 'I don't know' to most of the follow up questions posed in which the counsellor is attempting to assess risk levels. After a few minutes, the young person stops replying and doesn't write any more after this, despite the counsellor prompting him to reply.

Scenario 2

You are on call as safeguarding officer for your online youth counselling service. A counsellor has called you at 7.45pm with an emergency SG concern regarding the immediate safety of a 15 year old who has disclosed risk of physical abuse when her step father returns home in around 2 hours. On hearing the disclosure, you agree that there is immediate risk and plan to make a referral at once. When you go to check the user's profile, you notice that the user's details are not correct, and the address and phone number listed are not valid. However, the user has registered with an email address, which appears to contain their full name. They have also listed their date of birth.

Scenario 3

You are the safeguarding officer for an online youth counselling service; you receive an email with a disclosure from a volunteer counsellor who was working the night before. In it, the counsellor describes how a 13 year old client he has been working with via email counselling has now disclosed that she is not a UK resident, as she originally stated when registering for the service. She used the address of a cousin who lives in the UK to register, but is actually resident in Egypt. She tells the counsellor that she now trusts him and wants his help, as she is regularly beaten by her parents and wants this to stop. She did not supply her real address, as she wanted him to promise to keep this all secret as she is afraid of her parents finding out she has sought help.

Scenario 4

You are a volunteer moderator for an online youth charity which offers counselling, psychoeducational sessions and peer to peer support. You have been moderating the main chat room where users can talk to each other via synchronous group chat. You are concerned by the behaviour of a new user who joined a few days ago. They have listed themselves as 14, but something about their behaviour doesn't feel right and you have the suspicion that they may be an adult. You don't have any concrete proof of this, but you also feel that it isn't something you can ignore.

Scenario 5

You are a volunteer counsellor working for an online counselling service. You have held two synchronous chat-based counselling sessions with a 15 year old, whose presenting issues were bullying and low self-esteem. The client attends on time and appears keen, but his responses are brief and often the spelling mistakes make is hard to understand the meaning. They were very upset in the second session that you had not been available when they wanted to chat online with you outside of the weekly session time. When you remind them of the terms of the counselling agreement, which you took them through at assessment and which make clear sessions are weekly and you are not available outside these times, they are quiet. However, you do not feel confident that they have understood.

Scenario 6

You are the manager of an online youth counselling service, offering counselling to young carers. You also have a moderated message-board where site users can tell their story and read messages of support and encouragement from mentors. A counsellor contacts you to let you know their client has arrived for their session very distressed, as the story she had told about her life caring for her mum was now known and being discussed by several people at her school. In keeping with the site's moderation policy, she had not disclosed identifying names or places in her post, so she does not know how this happened and feels very ashamed and unsafe, as she had said some highly personal things about the emotional impact of caring for her mum.

Useful resources:

Safeguarding and managing risk:

Books

Anthony, K & Goss, S (2009) Guidelines for Online Counselling and Psychotherapy – third edition, BACP: Lutterworth

Jones, G & Stokes, A (2008) Online Counselling: A Handbook for Practitioners Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke

Barak, A (ed) (2012) Psychological Aspects of Cyberspace: Theory, Research, Applications CUP: Cambridge

Papers

Anthony, K (2015) Training therapists to work effectively online and offline within digital culture, British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 43:1, 36-4

Suler, J (2004) The Online Disinhibition Effect, Cyberpsychology & Behavior, Volume 7, Number 3, 321 - 326

Fenichel, M et al (2002) Myths and Realities of Online Clinical Work Cyberpsychology & Behavior Volume 5, Number 5 481-497

Hanley, T. (2009). The working alliance in online therapy with young people: preliminary findings. British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 37, 257 - 269.

Information on regulations and legislation relating to online counselling:

Association for Counselling and Therapy Online: UK based online counselling network

International Society for Mental Health Online: USA based online counselling network

Pippa Weitz Training: Online counselling and data security specialist

Information Commissioner's Office: UK data standards

ICO's microsite where up to date information on GDPR will be posted

International Organization for Standardization: Voluntarily adopted world wide standards for data practice

Get Safe Online: General guidance on online security recommended by ICO

CEOP: Guidance on online CP & SG and one click reporting

Developing safe online communities for young people

Guide to using the online training for peer facilitators

About Youth Access

Youth Access is the advice and counselling network.

We believe that every young person has a right to access free, high quality advice and counselling. Working with our members, we promote the YIACS model as part of local services for young people everywhere.

We do this by:

- Providing YIACS with the tools they need to deliver high quality services to young people
- Building the evidence to shape policy and services that meet young people's needs
- Promoting young people's right to be heard

Click here to find out more about the work we are doing

If you would like any more information about this guide, or the DigiTalk project, please contact karen@youthaccess.org.uk

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