Guidance on Accessible and Effective Remote Working

Inclusion Scotland
Disabled People's Organisation

Our voices ▪ Our choices

Charity number: SC031619 |Company number: SC243492

Foreword

There has never been a more important time for remote working to be effective and accessible to everyone. This guide offers advice, hints and tips for making remote working successful. The guide draws on our own experience as an organisation of disabled people that has long practiced and promoted accessible ways to work remotely. It also provides links to outside sources of information. We also thank the Scottish Government's Digital Directorate for their contributions to this guide.

At any time, the option of remote working can bring significant benefits to many people in terms of access and inclusion. Sometimes it can be an essential reasonable adjustment on grounds of an impairment. But, if not used correctly or with enough flexibility, it can introduce new barriers to inclusion.

While just using telephones is possible, this guide focuses on internet-based audio and video call methods. Many of these also allow participants to join by telephone.

At a time when remote working has become something many of us are having to do, this guide aims to enable people to do this in ways which are accessible to as many people as possible. Our hope is that, through this learning, more inclusive, flexible ways to work will become established usual practice in the longer term, to the benefit of employers, disabled people, people with caring, including child-care, responsibilities, and everyone in search of a good work/ life balance.

Contents

Foreword 1
Contents 2
1. Getting ready for accessible and effective remote working 3
1.1 Basic requirements 3
1.2 Health and wellbeing 4
1.3 Staff development for remote workers 8
2. Accessible and effective technology 8
2.1 Basic technology requirements 9
2.2 Conferencing software options 10
3. Accessible and effective meetings 14
3.1 Video meeting ground rules (etiquette) 15
3.2 Physical meetings also involving remote participants. 16
3.3 Accessible and effective for everyone 18
4. Accessible and Effective Communications 22
4.1 Email 22
5. Continuously improving 24
Glossary – what words mean 25
Contact Us 28
28

1. Getting ready for accessible and effective remote working

Making remote working effective and accessible doesn't involve a great deal of preparation but there are several key things for managers to consider and that employees may need to do.

1.1 Basic requirements

A suitable workstation

To work from home regularly and for lengthy periods, everyone is going to need appropriate ergonomic seating and equipment setup. Occasional home working huddled over a laptop at the kitchen table might not be an issue but longer term this could lead to neck, back or wrist pain.

Ensure your home workers think about a workstation setup that protects their health. Consider any equipment provision you need to make to support this. Bear in mind that disabled people may require reasonable adjustments in the form of specialist seating or standing/ raised desks. It may be possible to get support for these from the DWP's Access to Work scheme.

Carrying out the work

Different types of work obviously require different sorts of business process. Does the work require access to physical resources such as paper files, finance paperwork or records, a printer or photocopier, a scanner? Do people need somewhere to store paper copies securely? Review each need and consider how the resource is used and what alternative approaches might exist. These might include electronic signatures (though bear in mind data security), scanning paperwork, or supplying new equipment to a remote worker. The Access to Work scheme may be able to provide support for equipment needed on grounds of impairment.

There often are alternative, flexible ways to carry out work effectively, with a bit of creative thinking. The better employers become at this the

more they will open the workforce to talented people who are excluded by rigid practices.

Data security

If homeworkers need to handle sensitive data, they may need suitable security on their device. There are many ways to achieve this, such as enforcing the use of secure passwords and measures such as two-factor authentication, and the use of virtual private networking connections to secure file storage. Take appropriate technical and security advice on this, as this guide will not explore this area further.

Check your data protection policy. What implications does it have for home working? How and where will data be stored? Does your policy need amending to make clear how it applies to home working? For example, you may need to ensure your employees have a suitable secure means of storing personal data they need to work with at home.

Policy review

Of course, aside from data protection, other organisational and human resource policies and procedures may need to be reviewed too, to accommodate people who work from home. This may include things like finance procedures, health and safety, flexible working, expenses policy and others. During the COVID-19 pandemic, one way to respond could be to produce one organisational policy document that covers all the temporary changes you need to make. However, having done this, it is well worth thinking about if flexible, inclusive practices can be promoted by making some of these permanent. This could result in a long-term improvement to the flexibility and inclusiveness of your workplace for a variety of current and potential future employees.

1.2 Health and wellbeing

Health and safety when home working

Health and safety requirements don’t stop because someone is home working. Action to take includes asking staff to:

- Ensure their workspace, e.g. desk, seat and monitor, are set up correctly and comfortably for safe long-term use that suits their needs.

- Complete a display screen equipment (DSE) workstation assessment: Health and Safety Executive DSE workstation checklist
- Complete a home workplace Risk Assessment (for example using this guidance from Healthy Working Lives)
- Take regular breaks away from the screen.
- A good option can be to set your employees up with access to an online training module (e.g. training company "iHASCO" offers relevant Health and Safety training and a guide to completing your own DSE Workstation assessment)

Clearly, at the current time of the COVID-19 pandemic there is much to do to avoid spreading infection or becoming infected. There are many sources of information on this, notably: https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/ and https://coronavirusadvice.scot/

Mental Health and Remote Working

Making sure staff stay mentally healthy when remote working can be more challenging than when everyone is in the workplace. Remote working can mean people feel more isolated. It can also mean staff find it harder to talk about problems when they do arise. Bear in mind that some of your staff may have mental health conditions anyway that they may or may not have told you about and may be facing new challenges managing their condition.

There are several things you can do to support staff with their mental health and well-being when working remotely. As well as this guide you may find the website Mental Health at Work helpful.

- **Make mental health part of staff support discussions**

It is important to discuss with employees what they need to keep themselves mentally healthy. This is important at any time but even more so when working remotely from home.
By making time for this on a regular basis, you can help to prevent problems, and have a plan in place if things go wrong. There are tools and advice for employers and employees to use to have discussions about mental health and well-being. See for example: Mind - Guides to Wellness Action Plans and ACAS – Supporting mental health in the workplace

- **Breaks and working hours**

When working from home it is much easier to blur the lines between work and leisure time. It is all too easy to end up working later than you mean to, or not take enough breaks, and not be able to maintain a clear switch between “at work” and “at home”.

Advice for employees working from home:

Keep your work hours as strict as you would in the office. This means lunch breaks and coffee breaks too! If you don’t have a separate workspace, put your computer to sleep or shut it down.

Try and do something different, getting outside if you can, or going into a different room. Try to find an alternative activity for lunch breaks. If you have been using a computer for your work, do something that doesn’t involve using a screen.

Working from home can mean that you are not getting as much active time as you would commuting and being at work, so if you can build in some physical activity to your day it will help with mental and physical well-being.

One way of addressing the need for physical activity / outdoors time and the need for a mental sense of division between home and work can be to leave your home briefly (e.g. a short walk, even just a brief time in the garden if need be) at the start and end of your work period. Essentially this is a pretend “commute” and can help give facilitate a sense of switching to and from “work mode”.

- **Build social time into the working day**

Research has shown that just 15 minutes a day of social time in the workplace can have a significant impact on mental health (e.g. see Remote working could harm your mental health, study says). This is important at any time and applies to managers and leaders just as much as to other employees. Their mental health is important too, and they can lead by example and encourage other staff to join in.

At any time, if you have the option of a permanent video conferencing screen in the workplace, this can be used to keep remote workers involved in the daily informal life of the workplace, and can also serve to

link together multiple separate offices and allow for a degree of the "chance workplace chat" dynamic to play out even for remote workers (e.g. this example of FourSquare)

You can build in regular virtual coffee breaks or virtual team lunches. Other ideas could include a weekly longer social or peer support meeting, where 'work talk' is avoided. Organising staff social events for times when remote workers are in the office, for example for monthly staff meetings.

At a time when everyone is working from home, you could use video conferencing apps for social events. There are lots of resources for fun team-building games that could be done over video conferencing or even the telephone or email (e.g. this list on Museum Hack of 51 Fun Virtual Team Building Activities For Remote Teams.

It is important to make sure all this is **accessible to everyone**. Some staff may be working remotely as usual practice because of impairments or chronic conditions. Even if they don't, the same issues may apply for temporary home working. To make social events accessible could mean holding them at times that take account of care needs or responsibilities, including child-care. Make sure activities don't inadvertently create communication barriers, because they rely on people being able to see, hear, etc. Sometimes there will be software that can help overcome this (although it is important not to simply assume a software "fix" is fully effective – ask the staff affected in a safe environment for honest feedback!), or creative ways to make activities accessible (e.g. ensuring someone is "narrating" anything visual).

- **Consider making mental health support part of your employees' package**

Lots of workplaces are now providing gym memberships and even private health insurance. There are many workplace packages that include access to brief counselling and other mental health support for employees, and these could be more important for remote workers. Commercially available services can be found through web searches that can provide an assured capacity of support to any of your employees that may need it.

There is also a free workplace mental health support service funded as part of the Department of Work and Pensions Access to Work scheme, which can be found on Remploy's website.

1.3 Staff development for remote workers

Research shows that around 90% of learning in the workplace happens outside formal training. 70% happens though experiential learning, and 20% happens as social learning from colleagues (see The 70-20-10 Rule for Leadership Development).

Remote workers can be excluded from opportunities that are raised informally, such as side projects or collaborations, which could contribute towards their experiential learning. They can also miss out on learning from other staff about their work because they are not around for informal conversations.

Some ideas for how to reduce this include:

- A permanent video conferencing screen in the office for remote workers
- Staff forums where informal or co-working opportunities are shared
- Internal work shadowing
- Mentoring and peer support programmes

There are lots of online-based classes and courses springing up during the current COVID-19 situation, which may be well worth investigating. Again, such options may be of longer-term benefit in the future.

2. Accessible and effective technology

There is a lot of technology and different platforms that can enable people working remotely to be involved in meetings and interact with each other and with people external to the organisation. While these open up access and inclusivity, they can also introduce barriers for some. This section looks at basic technology requirements, reviews different platforms and then discussed how to make sure these ways of interacting are accessible to people with communication barriers.

Some of the language in this section will be unfamiliar to people who are not used to working in this way, so we have included a glossary at the end of the guide.

2.1 Basic technology requirements

Connectivity – workers need a reliable internet connection with enough bandwidth and not to be limited by monthly download limits. For live video connections a minimum connection speed of 128 Kbps (kilobits per second) is needed, but 400Kbps-1.5Mbps can be needed for high quality video. Read more about connection speed in the "Is your connection good enough?" Medium article.

Equipment – people need equipment capable of accessing and working on their work files. This might be a PC, perhaps a tablet, in theory even a smartphone, but consider what will be suitable for long periods of comfortable, safe use. The device, or a separate one, needs to be capable of making the video call. For this it will need a video camera of reasonable basic quality (preferably High-definition quality), a microphone (again better quality is preferable) and speakers or (better) a connected headset. An important note is that more complex video conferences can be badly affected by running on a device with low processor speed and/or memory capacity and will become "choppy" in performance, so for heavy use you need a good device. Zoom provide advice on recommended specifications for using their platform. Different platforms will vary slightly in their requirements.

Conferencing software – this is a piece of software which handles the call and may allow additional functions, such as, mute, text chat, adding additional participants, and screen sharing. There are many options which offer different advantages and disadvantages. You may find it better to make use of more than one, for different purposes. For example, some platforms are easier to use but only suitable for a small number of participants – and so are very suitable for one-to-one meetings or small group chats. Others may be a bit more complex but can handle up hundreds of participants. We provide a list of some of the available options in another section of this guide.

What could possibly go wrong?

Not providing the above to a good enough standard is an easy way to cause remote working to fail. Unreliable or slow setup can be frustrating

for staff. This can lead to people avoiding using it, limited communications, wasted time and failure to deliver important work effectively.

You should therefore be prepared to:

- Invest enough money in good quality equipment (or seek funding for it if need be). This may need to include providing your staff with home equipment to use, rather than relying on them using their own. You may also need to consider paid subscriptions for software platforms, depending on your requirements.
- Try different setups to see what works well and change if needed.
- Persevere and practice – it takes time to learn how to use and get to the point where this can be done quickly and efficiently.
- Make sure your employees get clear, accessible instructions and/or training on how to use the technology.
- Keep up to date – sometimes platforms fall out of use, or better options come along, and it is worth switching.

2.2 Conferencing software options

Skype/Skype for Business

This is free. It comes as an app you can down-load, or it can be browser based. It's included with Windows 10 and Office 365.

Good for: one-to-one calls, or small groups, where either one person sets up the call and invites participants or a link can be circulated in advance to allow everyone to connect themselves.

Pros:

- Performance is generally good.
- Screen sharing is possible.
- Tends to be well known and available to most (for regular Skype).
- Text chat fully integrated and easy to use, file sharing, etc.

Cons:

- Skype may be less suitable for larger meetings and cannot support event-sized meetings.
- Skype for Business can be difficult to use / unreliable between different organisations because additional technical setup is required.
- When used in its basic setup, meetings can be interrupted by the need to re-add participants dropped from the call rather than them being able to re-join themselves – this can be avoided by using the functionality to create a meeting link for people to use to join.

Microsoft Teams

This is an integrated application which allows for calls between users of Microsoft Office 365. It is specifically designed to make use of the ability to create Teams (specific groups of users with access to a shared set of chat channels, email and file storage) within the Office 365 system. Calls can be initiated from within Team chat channels which are automatically open to all members of that Team, users can have convenient access to those text chats, files stored on SharePoint as well as others applications in the Office 365 suite, such as shared OneNote pages, and guests can be invited to join.

Good for: Internal meetings and discussions by staff who are already on the same Office 365 system, and already using the Teams system – or where professional setup has been done to allow the convenient use of Teams between organisations.

Pros:

- If already using the Office 365 system, this can be an easy way to implement remote working meetings as setup is mostly done.
- Significant productivity benefits due to integration with other Office 365 applications and access to shared file storage.
- Actual calls use a fairly simple interface, familiar to anyone who has used Skype before.
- Good call quality.
- Meetings created via Teams can be joined by any staff member without the need for manual invites, “dialling” etc.
- Can handle up to 250 participants.

Cons:

- Not a useful option for participants without Office 365.

- The application is still relatively new, there may be occasional “bugs” and performance issues, such as the app freezing due to heavy activity by other parts of Office such as Outlook.
- Intended primarily as an internal communication tool, similar to Skype for Business there may be reliability/technical complications for using with external contacts.

Daily.co

This platform uses “Always on” video rooms, browser based. This means there is no call setup, at any time a user can go to the web link and join the call. It is free to use the basic version via their website, with a premium paid option to add video rooms directly to your own websites or to buy dedicated video devices for physical locations (e.g. your office meeting rooms).

Good for: constant video presence setups – e.g. video portals for remote workers to connect to the main office, or meeting room video conference rigs.

Pros:

- “Always on” video “room” setup, each room has a fixed web URL which can be shared in advance and consistently used – this means that remote participants can connect without any reliance on action at the other end. The advantage of this is remote participants can have the same degree of agency as on-site workers, as they can “enter the room” just as easily.
- Screen sharing functionality.
- Has optional text chat that can be opened.
- Free to use, via the Daily.co website
- Can use telephone to join calls (local call charges)

Cons:

- Seems to be more vulnerable to performance issues, especially on slower devices. Quality can drop with multiple participants, and if your device is being used for other activity at the same time (including background updating processes, etc).
- Sound quality can be less reliable than other options due to the above.
- Functionality is more limited if participants use mobiles or browsers other than the Chrome browser.

- Not suitable for larger numbers of participants due to performance issues and has a relatively low maximum user limit.

Zoom

This can be used via a browser or by downloading an app. There is the option to telephone into meetings. You must pay a subscription for unlimited calls involving more than 2 participants, and for full use of meeting scheduling tools.

Good for: All types of meetings, particularly larger ones or “webinars”

Pros:

- Performance is very good. Zoom is considered one of the most reliable platforms.
- Excellent accessibility
- It can handle very large numbers of participants well.
- It can be used for conference scale events (with additional cost) or training. It has a break-out rooms option, where groups of participants on a call can be temporarily split into separate calls for group working and then be brought back together.
- Screen sharing and shared control of your device is possible – can be good for remote support and/or training demonstrations)
- It can be accessed via browser without installing an app, or by telephone (with potential local rate costs for the calls).
- Text chat is available, as well as various “reaction” buttons which allow for easy audience participation (e.g. giving a “thumbs up” without speaking).
- It’s easy to mute, turn the camera on and off, etc.
- There are options for the host to control things, e.g. forced muting of participants, entering break-out rooms, etc.

Cons:

- It can be a little more challenging to learn to use initially, as less people are familiar with it than e.g. Skype. However, this can be overcome with only a little practice.
- The free licence limits calls with more than 2 participants to 40 minutes. A licence for full functionality starts at around £12

per host (you'd need further licences for more than one simultaneous meeting).
- It requires a bit of setting up, with the circulation of a meeting link (or a meeting code and password to use via the app or browser).

GoToMeeting

This can be browser or app based. There are options to phone in. It's available on paid subscription.

Good for: All types of meetings, especially larger ones

Pros:

- Performance is good.
- It can support very large numbers of participants.
- It allows for screen sharing and application sharing. It's also possible to share desktop control, i.e. allow remote users to take over the mouse and keyboard, for collaborative working or training.
- It can be accessed via browser without installing an app, or even by telephone (with extra cost).
- Text chat is available
- It's easy to mute sound, switch off the camera, etc.

Cons:

- It can be a little more challenging to learn how to use it initially, as fewer people are familiar with it than Skype. However, this can be overcome with only a little practice.
- There's no free option after an initial trial. Each meeting host needs to take out a subscription, although participants do not.
- It requires a bit of setup, with circulation of a meeting link, or a meeting code and password to use via the app or browser.

3. Accessible and effective meetings

Good meeting discipline is important for any meeting. It is even more important for formal remote meetings. Things like ensuring that meetings have an agenda with approximate timings and circulating meeting

papers well in advance become vital to allow remotely located attendees to track what is being discussed.

The effectiveness of a meeting, and how positively the experience will be viewed by all of the participants, can be greatly affected by the physical setup used, and the etiquette (or “ground rules”) employed.

The general rule is that **things that are good practice for any meeting become even more important for anyone participating remotely**, and even more important again for people with certain forms of impairment.

3.1 Video meeting ground rules (etiquette)

Noise control

Ensure that all participants in those rooms understand the need to help support remote participants taking part and are asked to try to minimise the noise they create during the call. Classic offenders include:

- Rustling papers.
- Eating – especially anything packaged such as crisps!
- Tapping feet or fingers on tables/table legs.
- Talking to someone off-camera, or noise being made in a neighbouring room.

A simple rule which helps with this is **“mute when not speaking”**. This requires participants to get into the habit of muting and unmuting as required, so that they are not broadcasting noise the rest of the time. This also has a benefit in terms of the connection quality as it reduces the demand on participants internet connections. This is less helpful when groups of people are participating from a single location via a single device, so personal noise control is more important in those cases.

Avoid things like eating, drinking, chewing, and coughing while your mic is live. This means if you are in a group which is taking part in a video call together from a single location you should avoid this completely while others are speaking, since you are less likely to be able to mute.

Position the mic away from background noise sources – for example, paper you need to move around, background noise sources such as fans or buzzing equipment, creaking furniture, etc.

Position any headset mic near but **not directly in front of or below** your mouth – doing so can mean it picks up regular breathing sounds, as well as occasional sharp bursts of sound from speech patterns that cause bursts of air (e.g. “P”, “B” and “T” sounds). These can be extremely distracting to others, but you are unlikely to be aware you are doing it unless someone tells you.

It may be useful to establish an agreed method for alerting someone to the fact they are breaking one of these rules as they will often not be aware of it themselves – e.g. via a quick note to them via text chat. Better to address the issue politely and quickly rather than let it continue and build up frustrations.

Taking turns and Chairing

As with in-person meetings only one person should be speaking at a time. It is harder to understand multiple voices over a remote link and with many software platforms this can result in the audio cutting back and forth, meaning parts of the speech are missed entirely.

Some platforms allow for “raising your hand” and give the host the ability to control muting and unmuting. This can allow for very tight chairing! A helpful rule is to encourage participants in advance to try to keep their contributions brief and to the point. This is helpful in any meeting but especially so in remote meetings where it can be even harder to concentrate.

Not all meetings will be formally chaired, but for those which are, it will be important for everyone to understand who the chair is, and what the expectations are in terms of following their lead.

3.2 Physical meetings also involving remote participants.

One of the key practical considerations when using remote meeting technology is whether all participants will be joining on the same basis. There might be a mixed approach, where most participants are in a physical meeting with some joining remotely.

Issues that can arise from mixed participation of this kind include:

- Those in the physical meeting space can communicate more easily than those who are remote. This can lead to uneven treatment in terms of chances to speak, vote, etc.
- There can be “side chats” taking place at the physical meeting location, which remote participants miss, and which can create distracting noise.
- In general – there is a much greater likelihood that remote participants will be badly affected by noise in the busier physical meeting space, e.g. rustling papers next to the mic on the table, banging glasses on the table, doors opening and closing, etc.
- It’s almost impossible to avoid a two-tier sense of status and inclusion. Remote participants tend to feel they are “being a bother” and may feel more inhibited to participate and speak up. Those interacting face-to-face may develop more rapport and informal links. This can lead to a meaningful difference in influence and access for the remote workers.

Some of these issues can be reduced or controlled through good chairing which considers the greater need to include remote participants, but it is impossible to eliminate all of these factors entirely.

Some companies take a policy approach to this issue that if any members of a team joining a meeting are remote, then everyone should join the same way, even if that involves being on a headset at their desks in the same physical office. One potential downside of this to be aware of is background noise being more of an issue due to being picked up by multiple microphones in the same office (this can lead to an echo effect). This can be reduced through better use of the mute function, and better-quality headsets (especially those with noise cancelling features).

Physical setup of the room

For meetings where there is a group in one place, with remote participants:

- You will need a microphone of enough quality and range to pick up all participants in the room that need to be heard by remote participants. A single low-quality cheap mic at one

end of a long conference table will result in a very poor experience, especially compared to a professional grade conferencing system in the centre of a round table. You may need to consider having multiple microphone/speaker points to cover a larger room. (E.g. the Jabra Speak 710 Bluetooth speakerphone can be linked in pairs and is a relatively easy, good quality setup, short of a professionally installed system)

- Reduce and ideally eliminate as many sources of background noise as possible. For example, open windows can mean noise outdoors or wind can be picked up by the microphone. Loud ventilation systems or fans can make hearing difficult. Consider things like doors being used during the meeting that might loudly bang closed, etc.
- It can help of you can place the microphone(s) slightly away from where people are sitting or noise sources, ideally elevated slightly. A useful tip can be to acquire a padded surface of some kind to place under it, such as a beanbag or foam pad, as this can reduce the pickup of noise and vibration through the table.

For remote participants:

- Headset microphones are generally preferable to fixed units built into laptops, or on a table – although a good quality fixed unit placed separately from the keyboard can work well.
- Having quick and easy use of muting is a big help – e.g. many headsets have a mute button built in (or a “flip up” operation on the microphone) which can make this more intuitive and routine than using the controls on the software.
- Having a quiet, preferably private place where you can join the call from will give a better result in terms of noise control and concentration.
- If using the camera, consider lighting. You should **avoid having a light source behind your head** as this throws your face into shadow, making it harder to read lips or expressions.

3.3 Accessible and effective for everyone

Accessibility is an issue for everyone, but some Deaf or disabled people can experience additional barriers. And meetings that aren’t fully accessible also aren’t fully effective.

Doing all the things that make meetings more accessible for everyone will be particularly important for some people. This includes Deaf people and people with hearing impairments, blind people and people with visual impairments, neuro-divergent people, e.g. some autistic people, some people with learning difficulties, brain injury or learning disability. or disabled people. But there is additional action that can easily be taken to address many of the barriers they would otherwise face. Meanwhile, doing many of these things will also help everyone!

These might include:

Presenting clearly, avoiding complexity: In general, everything can be harder to follow over a remote connection method, so it is more important than with physical meetings to present information efficiently, clearly, and avoiding unnecessary complexity of language, etc.

Poor sound quality: There may be difficulty hearing and/ or following speech over the connection, particularly if sound quality is anyway of poor quality, distorted, etc.

Poor video quality: Remote participant screen space may limit ability to see presentations and track the speaker. Poor connection might limit framerate making visual information difficult. This may impact on the ability to lip-read, or to understand speech with the help of facial expressions and body language. Any visual information being presented may not be fully accessible, perhaps due to low resolution or limitations of camera placement, but this is especially true for blind or visually impaired participants.

Difficulty sifting out background noise: Listening to sound via an electronic audio link generally takes away the ability to “focus in” on the important sound and ignore the unimportant. The result is that background noise can seem much louder than it would if you were there in person and more difficult to ignore. For those with audio processing issues, which includes not only hearing-impaired people but also a lot of autistic people, and others, this can be even more challenging.

Inaccessible platforms: There may be issues with the accessibility of the platform itself. For example, the interface may be unusable by assistive technology users due to poor coding – for example people who use screen readers due to sight loss. Live captioning may be available but of such poor quality that it is of very little use – e.g. voice recognition

software is still not sufficiently advanced to reliably transcribe all accents, languages and words with enough accuracy. Some platforms may not display enough text at once making it very hard to keep up and follow the context.

Best practice is to prioritise testing with any staff with communication barriers to see what works for them, and adjust accordingly, rather than assuming a solution is fully effective.

Overcoming barriers

Investing in good quality equipment, finding the right platform, practicing good meeting ‘etiquette’ and noise control are all doubly important. But there are some additional actions that can be particularly helpful.

Breaks: Allowing for more breaks can be helpful. People will have a greater need for short breaks, not just for comfort but also to give their brains a rest from having to focus to hear and understand the call. This is especially important if your group includes people with impairments, conditions or neurodivergence that makes this harder. It may not be sustainable for many people to spend all-day doing this, or to do so repeatedly for a long period without gaps. This includes people providing communications support, such as Palantypists (verbatim speech transcribers, or stenographers), who will need regular breaks.

Circulate papers in advance: Share presentations and meeting papers in advance – This is especially for those people who need to be able to review the materials before the meeting due to an access reason. For example, a blind or sight impaired person may need to use a screen-reader program to read the content in advance as they will not be able to do so during the meeting. People providing communications support will also appreciate seeing papers in advance.

Screen sharing: Use screen sharing to help keep focus. Many platforms have “screen sharing”. This allows a meeting participant to broadcast their desktop or an application window as a viewable video feed for everyone on the call. This can replace or add to their camera feed. Make sure that the text size is big enough to make this accessible. Cramming a whole slide full of small text is never accessible but even less so when you can’t rely on it being projected onto a huge screen. Also note that using screen sharing instead of your camera feed can

introduce an additional access issue for hearing and audio processing impaired people.

Accessible presentations: The Web Accessibility Initiative have a guide on how to make your presentation accessible that is worth reading. Always summarise what is on your slides. Verbally summarise the essential information in any visual presentation you are giving, to make it more likely all participants can follow what you are presenting.

Speak slowly and clearly: Slow down your presentation – if you are presenting a new piece of visual information, you should pause in your speaking for a moment to allow people to process it before you continue to speak.

Show your face: Ensure everyone can see your face when you are talking. Participants who **rely on lip-reading** to hear you need to **see your face whenever you are talking**. This means that you either must switch back and forth between screen-sharing and your camera, only speaking when on camera, or have a platform that allows both to be displayed and viewed at once. Allow time for people to look at the visual information while you are not speaking.

Repeat questions before answering them: Some people may not have been able to see the questioner or they may not have as good a mic as the presenter, so they may not have heard the question at all. Repeating the question makes it clear you have understood it and helps ensure everyone in the meeting is aware of what question was asked.

Communication Support: For participants who are Deaf or have a hearing impairment, arranging appropriate communication support may be necessary. This is likely to be particularly helpful and allow more equal participation especially for larger or longer meetings covering complex topics.

Communications support may include a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter, electronic note-taker, or a palantypist (live transcriptionist). People providing communications support may be located with the participant when they are on the call. Or they may be somewhere else, joining remotely, with the participant receiving their output. For example, this might consist of a good video view of the interpreter, or a separate feed of the text transcription).

For more information:

- Sign Language Interactions can provide BSL interpreters
- AVerbatim STTR can provide transcription services
- Contact Scotland BSL provide a video relay sign language interpreter service (where an interpreter gets on a video call with the person needing support, and interprets between them and the hearing participant)

4. Accessible and Effective Communications

4.1 Email

It is important to make all methods of communication as accessible as possible, including old favourites. Emails continue to be a relied on method of communication in many work places. Receiving a high number of emails at work is a well know problem of modern times. According to The Radicati Group in 2015, the number of business emails sent and received per user per day was 122 (see Email statistics Report 2015-2019.

Emails are an important method of communication, especially for anyone who doesn't find phone calls accessible. However, when staff receive are large number of emails in aday they can become difficult to manage. It can be hard to identify which are important or urgent. Here are some suggestions on making emails more accessible and to help you and your colleagues manage your inboxes.

Consider whether is email the right method of communication: Before hitting send, consider whether this is the best way to communicate with your recipient. If you need an answer to a question quickly, then an instant method of communication might be better such as a phone call or instant message on Microsoft Teams chat etc. You can always follow up your conversation with an email, confirming what you agreed to.

Use alternative methods of communication for urgent items: When something is urgent but email is the easiest way of sending written information, alert the recipient to the importance and presence of the email using a "real time" method of communication where you can

confirm they have received and acknowledged the email. This could be a phone call, text or Instant Message (whatsapp, chat etc). You can flag to colleagues that you have sent the email and due date on any actions. Please do not assume someone reads your email as soon as you send it.

Indicate the purpose of the email: Give an indication as to the purpose of the email in the subject using an indication in the subject header. Commonly used indicators are:

FYI: For Your Information (i.e this is something for you to read but will not require you to do anything and is not very important).

FYA: For Your Attention (i.e. this is something important for you to know).

Action Required (i.e. I need you to take action so I can progress with this item).

Write a clear subject: Use an informative and relevant header in the subject line (i.e. not “Stuff”). This helps readers to identify the importance and relevance of an email as well as find it in a search of their inbox.

Update the subject: Update email subjects if the topic of an email changes in an email thread. Ideally, this shouldn’t happen as conversations are much better suited to a different communications method such as Microsoft Teams chat, phone calls, face to face etc. If a thread’s subject does change it is helpful to update this in the subject line. The old subject can still be referred to i.e. “New Subject WAS: Old Subject”. This is especially useful when internally forwarding on emails from outside the organisation.

Put relevant dates in the subject: Put any key dates and always include deadlines in the subject line. This helps recipients identify the urgency and the importance of an email.

Put one-liners in the header: Include one-liner replies in the subject header and end the header with EOM for End Of Message. This means recipients do not have to open the email to read it. You can simply read, acknowledge or take action and delete. This is especially useful when confirming receipt of an email or thanking someone. i.e. “Thanks EOM”. This is useful if you views emails without the reading pane.

Brevity: Keep emails brief and begin the email with the key message or actions required. Remember the first line or two of an email will appear

in the email preview. This makes emails easy to understand, as recipients immediately know the subject and what is being asked of them. It is also helps the recipient identify the importance/urgency of an email.

Use headings: When emails cannot be brief break down the information using relevant headings.

5. Continuously improving

The COVID-19 pandemic is forcing many of us must get used to working in very different ways. Technology that allows video meetings and different forms of remote interaction has become part of everyday life. As we learn more about how to do this, as new access issues arise and new ways to find them are solved, it is important that learning is captured and shared. It is also the case that technology is advancing very rapidly. New platforms may come into existence and improvements may be made to existing ones.

We intend to update this guide at regular intervals. We would therefore be very grateful if you could let us know about anything you think it would be helpful to include. Our contacts details are at the end of this guide.

To keep this guide up-to-dare, is not just be helpful to us, but to anyone who is concerned to adopt best practice when it comes to accessible and effective interacting. Most importantly, it could make all the difference to the many people who have a great deal to contribute but who would otherwise be excluded.

Glossary – what words mean

App, app suite: a piece of software, or a family of related software used for particular purposes

Application sharing: A function where a remote participant can allow remote viewing of content on their device, or even remote control of the mouse and keyboard.

Assistive technology: A general term for devices and/or software designed to provide additional support or functionality that is helpful to people with non-standard communication needs, and/or with physical or mental impairments – such as control of text size and format, colour and contrast, transcription of text into speech, spelling or grammar, or alternative ways to provide input such as speech recognition or special keyboards, mice or other buttons, etc.

Bandwidth: Refers to the amount of data that can be sent within a given amount of time by a data connection – different applications require different amounts for different purposes (e.g. video requires much more than just audio). Can be restricted by limited internet connectivity.

Browser, browser-based: Accessible using the software on a device for accessing the internet – generally used to mean that a piece of software or a communications platform does not require separate installation on your device to use.

Camera feed: The video being sent by your device camera which may be going out to remote participants

Chat channels: Text-based communication through an app or browser page, where the conversation is retained and can be viewed “not live”.

Chrome: A commonly available web browser, made by Google.

Desktop: A general term referring to what is showing on your PC or device screen, or sometimes used to refer to the device itself in other contexts.

Desktop control: A term for when a remote user grants or is granted remote control of a device, meaning mouse and keyboard input can be provided to the device by a remote user.

Framerate: How often a video image updates – which can be limited by poor internet bandwidth and/or processing power of the device. Low framerate results in “choppy”, less useful video and things can be missed.

File sharing: A means by which computer files can be made available to multiple users, or sent from one user to another via an app or a web platform.

Functionality: The features an app or device is capable of providing

Host: in this context this usually refers to the person who has set up a remote meeting or video conference and has control of the call. Can mean they can impose various controls, invite others, etc.

Kbps: refers to bandwidth of a data connection, means “kilobits per second” – a bit is a single piece of data, kilo means one thousand. Audio-only calls and basic web browsing can require 100-200 Kbps level bandwidth. Definition: https://techterms.com/definition/kbps

Mbps: as with Kbps but refers to “megabits” which is one million bits, per second. Video calls can require up to 1Mbps level of bandwidth, or more for many participants, to result in a good quality connection.

Mute: used to refer to stopping the sound from being sent by your device, usually referring specifically to the microphone on it – meaning that other people on a call cannot hear you or the sounds at your location. Most video calls have a button for this, but many microphones have a physical button for it as well.

OneNotes: Refers to a Microsoft Office 365 application for keeping note pages and sharing them with other users.

Palantypist: a term used to refer to speech to text stenographers who specifically work to support those with communication support needs (e.g. deaf and hard of hearing people)

Platform: refers to multiple user access to the same application, conference call or online workspace, potentially via different methods (e.g. some users via app, some via web browser, some via telephone)

Processing power: The computing capability of a PC, tablet or other device, mainly dictated by how powerful its CPU (central processing unit) is – relates to how many things it can do at once, or how quickly it can perform them. Asking a device to handle more activity than its CPU

can keep up with leads to it slowing down, and may mean reducing the quality to keep up (e.g. reducing the video frame rate, or audio quality)

Screen-sharing: when one user broadcasts the content of their device screen to the other users on a call as a video feed, so remote participants can see what they have on their screen

SharePoint: a Microsoft file storage, management and sharing platform

Software: general term referring to specific functions being run on a computing device

Text chat: a means of sending and receiving text messages within an application or web platform, so that multiple remote participants can receive and respond to them

Video conferencing rig: an assemblage of technology designed to provide an effective video conferencing function (e.g. an interconnected camera, microphone, speaker and display screen with a data connection)

Video “room” set up: refers to an online virtual space where people can meet using video conferencing, and may include a connection to a physical room which has been set up with a dedicated video conferencing rig as a main feature

Contact Us

Inclusion Scotland
22 – 24 Earl Grey Street,
Edinburgh,
EH3 9BN
(please note we are not receiving mail during the COVID-19 lockdown period)

info@inclusionscotland.org

Office number: 0131 370 6700
(Calls welcome via Text Relay or ContactScotland BSL relay)

Visit our website: inclusionscotland.org

Follow us on Social Media:

twitter.com/inclusionscot

Facebook.com/InclusionScotland

Instagram.com/inclusionscotland

Charity number: SC031619 | Company number: SC243492