



Digital Inclusion and Accessibility: Learning from Participation and Engagement Activity During Covid-19

Health and Adult Services Participation and
Engagement Team

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With thanks to:



Executive Summary

This report by the Health and Adult Services Participation and Engagement team captures the experiences of people with physical, sensory and learning disabilities, and autistic people, in using online communication platforms during the pandemic.

It considers the opportunities and challenges that digital platforms present to accessibility and inclusion, as well as exploring potential solutions. The report highlights the benefits that online meetings have offered in terms of removing travel barriers and enabling people to stay connected and access new opportunities, as well as empowering people to develop new skills. At the same time, disabled people faced particular challenges around:

- Access to support for people who use care and support services;
- Digital skills, with particular concerns regarding online safety;
- The accessibility and functionality of different meeting platforms, as well as accessibility across websites more generally; and
- The affordability of, and access to, a device and high quality data connection, and the accessibility issues which a poor connection can create.

This executive summary cannot, however, do justice to the rich complexity of experiences that people have shared with us. Quoted extensively throughout, people's insights are the mainstay of this report and demonstrate that a person-centred approach and careful consideration of a wide range of factors is vital to address accessibility issues when engaging and working with people online.

The report closes with key recommendations to improve digital inclusion. Recognising that there is much good work already underway, this report recommends that North Yorkshire County Council and other providers consider any new or additional actions required to enable the following:

- Digital inclusion training is accessible to disabled people, including ensuring that the staff/volunteers who deliver it have the skills to support people with a range of disabilities.
- Digital skills are included in skills development and transition for young people with SEND.
- Accessible information is made available to help people to understand how to stay safe online and colleagues who support people are aware and make use of it.

- Guidance is made available to providers and individuals about supporting people to safely access technology and online content, including enabling people to have choice and control in use of technology.
- Information, advice, guidance and training is available to people about managing data and choosing and switching broadband or mobile data providers.
- People can access opportunities to try out different technologies and devices.
- Allow flexibility and choice when selecting video conferencing platforms to take account of people's accessibility requirements and familiarity with certain platforms.
- Increase access to affordable devices, for example via digital inclusion initiatives, and ensure that the criteria for access are sufficiently inclusive and the opportunity to access such initiatives is well-communicated.
- There is the facility for people to join online meetings by dialling in by telephone.
- Support to use technology is considered within the commissioning of care and support packages.

Scope of this report

Please note that this report is not attempting to reflect all activity across NYCC relating to digital access and inclusion; we are aware that there will be lots of learning by other teams and examples of good practice. The report captures the experience of the HAS Participation and Engagement (HAS P&E) team and the people with whom we directly work, as our contribution to organisational learning and ongoing development of solutions to the barriers to digital inclusion experienced by some North Yorkshire communities.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented growth of online and digital platforms to communicate. This has created both challenges and opportunities for disabled people. The HAS P&E team has continued to work with disabled people throughout this time, both on- and offline. This report presents insights and experiences that disabled people have shared with us directly, alongside our own learning, and feedback from the self-advocacy support team at KeyRing. It asks what can be learnt from the pandemic and how can it inform the way we use technology to support disabled people in the future.

The bigger picture

Technology has much to offer disabled people and assistive technology in particular has been heralded as offering opportunities to overcome a range of accessibility issues. However, research consistently shows that disabled people are at higher risk of digital exclusion.

[Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020 highlighted:](#)

- Disabled people are 25% less likely to have the skills to access devices and get online by themselves.
- 42% of disabled people had a low or very low level of digital engagement.
- 7% of people who had not been online in the last 3 months said that they had an impairment which prevented them from using the internet.
- Disabled people are 22 percentage points less likely than non-disabled people to have the seven key foundation digital skills. People with physical and sensory disabilities are least likely to have these skills.
- Disabled people are 40% less likely than non-disabled people to have received digital skills support from their workplaces.

Disability also intersects with other factors and inequalities that place people at greater risk of digital exclusion. Disabled people are [more likely to be living in poverty](#), more likely to be [unemployed](#), more likely to have left school with [no qualifications](#), and more likely to be [aged 65 years or older](#). All of these also place people at higher risk of digital exclusion.

Where is our data from?

This report draws on feedback provided by the following groups:

- Members of North Yorkshire Disability Forum and Local Disability Forums—user-led groups for people with sensory and physical disabilities (approx. 25 individuals)
- Self-advocates with a learning disability and/or autism (approx. 68 individuals)
- Service providers
- KeyRing Self-Advocacy Support Team (service commissioned by NYCC to support people with a learning disability and/or autism to speak up about what is important to them and others)

North Yorkshire Learning Disability Partnership Board (NYLDPB) also created an easy read survey about people’s experiences of using technology and the internet. We had 10 responses to this survey. The questions can be found in Appendix 1.

In addition to the above, the team has continued to work with a number of community forums and with partners and colleagues to continue engagement activities via online platforms (as well as other methods), and this experience has contributed to the findings in this report.

“A whole new can of worms—but in a good way!”

On 16 March 2020, Boris Johnson addressed the nation and advised everyone to avoid non-essential contact with others and unnecessary travel as far as possible. North Yorkshire Disability Forum was due to meet in York four days later, bringing together NYCC staff and people with physical and sensory disabilities from across the county. Rather than cancel the meeting, the P&E team decided to move to an online platform. The forum had never met online previously, and members had only limited experience of online meetings.

Not everyone was able to join the meeting, reflecting some of the issues discussed in more detail later in this report. But people who did take part were very positive—it was **“a whole new can of worms—but in a good way!”** Members particularly highlighted that it had saved a lot of travelling and made the meeting more accessible to people who cannot travel. People were also excited about the possibilities it allowed for inviting people from further afield.

Since then, North Yorkshire Disability Forum have continued to meet online and the local disability forums we support have also successfully held online meetings. One local disability forum told us that online meetings had enabled new members to join who had previously been unable to attend in-person meetings. They are now looking at how they can continue to offer people the option to join online when they return to in-person meetings. However, they were equally concerned about members who had not been able to join meetings throughout the pandemic due to digital exclusion issues.

North Yorkshire Learning Disability Partnership Board and its associated subgroups have not met online, reflecting the challenges that online platforms pose to making meetings accessible to people with a learning disability and autistic people. Nevertheless, many self-advocates have developed digital skills and gained newfound confidence in using technology. They have enjoyed taking part in online meetings, webinars and groups. This includes joint meetings with North Yorkshire Disability Forum where they have put questions to Richard Webb, NYCC Corporate Director of Health and Adult Services. Their first question to Richard asked about the council's plans to offer training and support to help people access technology.

Self-advocates told us that learning to use technology opened up new opportunities to have their voices heard, empowering them to participate in meetings and events across England and beyond. A great example of this is the All Party Parliamentary Group about COVID-19 that North Yorkshire self-advocate Dean joined in November 2020. Dean questioned Justin Tomlinson, Minister for Disabled People, about support to ensure people with a learning disability and autism did not feel isolated. Self-advocates told us:

“Through KeyRing I have learnt how to use Zoom. During most days of the week I have become involved with other KeyRing members from all over the country. Because of this I don't feel so alone as I've got something to look forward to and I've made new friends. I've even made friends overseas in Ghana to find out how things are there.”

“I would have been fed up and bored without the online meetings and activity packs as they have been really helpful. I have been really involved in lots of groups and meetings online and part of the LDE [Learning Disability England] group checking the website. I feel very proud of everything I've done this year.”

Some self-advocates said they are now more active and connected than ever:

“Even though we have been in lockdown I think I have been learning more than ever. I am more active than ever now. KeyRing has been doing a lot of things online and on social media and I’ve been taking part. I’ve been to lots of webinars which were about different issues like human rights and DNR’s. I would have felt really isolated if KeyRing hadn’t put me in touch with these people. Now I have lots of contacts and I am really active on social media but before lockdown I didn’t know about these organisations or groups. The meetings that KeyRing either organised or told me about have given my days structure. I would have been lounging around feeling miserable and getting upset but the meetings gave me a reason to get up, wash my face and get dressed and has helped with my mental health.”

As people’s comments highlight, taking part in these events and meetings has been very important for people’s mental health and wellbeing. It has helped people develop new routines, stay connected and maintain a sense of purpose. This is reflected in responses to the NYLDPB survey too: social media, online meetings, staying in touch with friends and keeping up to date with what’s happening in the UK and beyond were common ways that people told us they used technology.

KeyRing have initiated a weekly Zoom quiz which has been an enormous success and has enabled people to develop new skills and meet new people:

“When we introduced the self-advocacy quiz, we did not anticipate just how popular this would be. Over the last six months since the quiz first started, we have seen a real change in people’s self-confidence as they take it in turns to host the quiz. Each quiz host chooses ten general knowledge questions and selects ten pieces of music for contestants to guess. The quiz has been very supportive and well attended, with up to 20 people with a learning disability joining each week from across the county. As a result, many friendships have developed and these have continued to flourish outside of the quiz.”

Self-advocates who have not been able to do this have felt more isolated and KeyRing’s weekly phone calls and activity packs have been important to enable people to continue to take part and feel included.

This highlights the importance of continuing to provide offline opportunities alongside supporting people to get online.

“I really miss going to the KeyRing meetings and seeing everyone but Jess rings me every week, it’s nice to keep in touch. I really like the word-searches and activity packs we get through the post and the quiz questions and surveys we go through.”

There is, then, much to gain from technology. The rest of the report looks at some of the key challenges that disabled people in North Yorkshire face getting online. It offers tips to overcome these and makes key recommendations.

Online skills

Members of disability forums and self-advocates have had varying levels of familiarity with technology. Some people were experienced technology users but had limited experience of using online meeting platforms. Other people got online for the first time during the pandemic. KeyRing worked closely with self-advocates to support them to get online.

Before the first online North Yorkshire Disability Forum, the HAS P&E team invested a significant amount of time in offering all members a half-hour, 1-1 session practising with GoToMeeting, our chosen platform. This enabled people to get familiar with the platform and troubleshoot any issues (e.g. getting cameras working) before the meeting. We also produced an easy read participant’s guide (see Appendix 2). This explained how to join and key features, as well covering important online meeting etiquette.

GoToMeeting was chosen as, from previous experience within the P&E team, it met our accessibility requirements and was easy to use. This was essential for the people with whom we work.

We have continued to offer ongoing 1-1 sessions to help people troubleshoot problems, set-up new equipment and install meeting software on additional devices. It is important not to underestimate the amount of time needed for this or the variety of ongoing issues that can arise. Meeting platforms can look substantially different on different devices, and software updates can trigger compatibility issues.

Respondents to the NYLDPB questionnaire told us that accessible information about technology was key to helping to make the internet more accessible for them.

Asked ‘What kind of help would be useful for you?’, self-advocates told us:

“Easy to read information on how to fix problems on computer or laptop or if needed someone to show me what to do or somewhere I can trust to fix my equipment”

“Good clear easy information on a CD which I can play to hear how to do things for myself”

Some self-advocates said they and their friends would like more training on particular tasks such as using Zoom. Five out of ten self-advocates who responded to the questionnaire told us that they were concerned about security and privacy or online bullying, indicating more training and information may be needed in this area.

“I worry that I might get hacked by hackers if I'm not careful. Internet Trolls... I would like to know that when I'm using the internet, I know which website is safe for me to go onto.”

“Sometimes I worry about people saying horrible things about disabled people on Facebook.”

“[I] Worry about clicking on the wrong thing. Being taught how to use it properly [would help], so I'm not as afraid.”

These concerns echo the [Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020](#), which showed that privacy and security concerns were the most common reason people gave for not being online.

People highlighted how empowering it was to develop digital and problem-solving skills.

“Sometimes I make mistakes and my mum helps me but I am proud that I can do it myself, I learnt at school.”

“I am proud for being able to use Zoom and get on the KeyRing Facebook page by myself.”

People also told us that prior to the pandemic they had appreciated being able to get 1-1 support in local libraries. Services such as AbilityNet have continued to offer telephone and online IT support to

disabled people throughout the pandemic. However, for people who need face-to-face support, the pandemic has presented obvious challenges. Living Well have been able to provide some face-to-face support with getting online. Although this service is not designed for people with ongoing care needs, during the pandemic they have been working with people with on-going care and support needs.

Sources of help

[NYCC Adult Learning](#) have developed simple online courses to help people gain confidence in using a range of online tools including Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Skype. The courses are entry level and are suitable for someone who has very basic IT skills.

[Living Well](#) have digital champions and all team members can support someone to get on-line. They can refer people to NYCC training and learning sessions on digital inclusion. They also access free computers, tablets and mobiles when available and can support people to apply to charities and beneficiary funds to get IT equipment.

[Citizens Online](#) is a new project that aims to set up a network of “Digital Champions” across North Yorkshire who will help local people to learn how to use digital technology and stay safe online. They offer Champions a range of training, including some that is specifically aimed at supporting people with a learning disability. They also have a digital skills support line that learners can ring to request support: 0808 1965883.

[AbilityNet's ITCanHelp volunteers](#) provide free IT support to older people and disabled people of any age.

KeyRing have produced some Internet safety resources which can be used to start conversations about how to stay safe online. They can be downloaded here: <https://www.keyring.org/news/internet-safety-resources.aspx>

[Dimensions have made an easy read](#) guide to staying safe on the internet. You can download it here: <https://www.dimensions-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/Staying-safe-on-the-internet-Easy-Read-guide.pdf>

Ace Anglia and Leading Lives have made a series of easy read booklets and talking text videos to give advice, tips and support around staying safe online. They cover topics like passwords, scams and paying for apps. They are available here:

<https://suffolkordinarylives.co.uk/information/staying-safe-online-resources/>

Accessible technology, Accessible websites

Disabled people, particularly people with physical and sensory disabilities, told us that smart devices like Alexa were useful in enabling them to do household tasks, browse the internet and stay in touch with others. During the pandemic, one local disability forum member obtained a grant from Stronger Communities to purchase [Echo devices to loan out to people with sight loss and hearing loss](#). These enabled people who were shielding to access audiobooks, songs, jokes and voice-controlled calling to friends and family, at a time when they had little other contact with people. Echo Shows, which have screens, were particularly useful for people with hearing loss as they have video calling and options for subtitles. This video option means that British Sign Language users can sign each other.

It is key to ensure that disabled people and those who support them are aware of how different types of technology can meet their specific access needs. One person told us, for example, that a smartphone that uses keys rather than a touch screen would be helpful. Another person suggested “*NYCC should do another digital technology day to let people try things out*”. This refers to the digital drop-ins which were held as part of the [My Health My Tech engagement](#) activity, where people could watch demonstrations of different types of technology and try them out for themselves.

It is equally important that web content is accessible and works with assistive technology such as screen readers. Unfortunately [WebAIM's 2020 review](#) of the top one million websites found that over 98% of home pages failed to meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2 (WCAG 2), the international standard for making accessible web content. In the UK, public sector websites, including the NYCC website, now have a legal duty to ensure they have a plan to comply with accessibility regulations which are based on WCAG standards. In NYCC, the council's communications and digital teams have an ongoing review programme to ensure that our website meets the legal requirements. Our accessibility statement is here:

<https://www.northyorks.gov.uk/website-accessibility>

Top Tips

Some local sight support charities have resource centres where people can try out assistive and adaptive technology, when coronavirus restrictions permit.

NYCC Health and Adult Services provided the opportunity to try adaptive technology during digital drop-in events in 2019, which received positive feedback from attendees.

Support

Access to support emerged as a key issue, particularly amongst self-advocates with a learning disability and autism. Some people were confident using certain devices like a tablet, but needed support to use a laptop, or to use particular programmes, particularly when they ran into problems.

“I need bit of help using internet when things go wrong for example using GoToMeetings and Microsoft teams.”

“I don’t use the tablet to send emails as I don’t have support to do this as I am registered blind.”

Some people had support from family members; others needed help from support workers. One person told us *“Mum usually gives me as much advice as possible but if something happens, we usually don’t know what to do”*. Another person said it would be helpful to have *“Good understanding by staff who support me on how to use the tablet to help me get online”* and that *“support staff need training to help more people get online”*. As this highlights, it is important that both support staff and family carers can access training to help them develop their own digital skills as well as those of the person they support. According to a survey of social care providers conducted during the pandemic as part of [Hft’s Sector Pulse Check](#), 56% of providers said a lack of digital skills among staff was a fairly, or very large, barrier to individuals keeping in touch with loved ones.

We heard that staff were not always supportive of people getting online. Some did not regard this as part of their role and in some cases, providers’ policies seemed to discourage it.

“Staff help me but they say it is not their job to do this.”

Some self-advocates found that providers would not support them to download and access apps or would not facilitate them getting a data

package. We heard about conflicting perspectives on whether someone had capacity to use video calling and in one case staff had installed a password on the person's device that the person was not given, and which was subsequently lost.

Another person told us *"I ... have a problem with Court of Protection [COP] who are in charge of my finances agreeing I have the money to pay for anything I want to buy on the internet"*. They told us *"If your money is held under COP there needs to be a clear process of how payment can be made to purchase apps"*.

We are aware that work is underway by the Court of Protection Team to address the above issue where possible and enable more choice and control for all people supported by the team.

Choice and control are consistent themes here. Providers and staff need to be supported to enable people to access technology in ways which are both safe and empowering.

Connectivity and Costs

Connection

By now, most people have been in an online meeting where someone has lost connection. There is significant ongoing work to improve the coverage of broadband and mobile data in North Yorkshire. However, [4.37% premises](#) in the county still cannot access broadband that meets the Legal Universal Service Obligation of 10Mbps; in [Richmondshire this rises to 9.52%](#). This is significantly above the England average of 0.93% (statistics as of 9 March 2021). Mobile data can also be patchy with [35% of the landmass in North Yorkshire not having 4G mobile signal](#).

Connection issues can be frustrating, and require skills and confidence to resolve or work around. They can equally create access issues: poor video or audio quality can cause difficulties for people with sight loss, hearing loss or sensory processing difficulties. People with hearing loss in particular have told us that they find it hard to take part in online meetings because of not being able to hear what is discussed. And although turning off your camera and incoming video can help reduce the bandwidth needed, it also creates access issues for people who need to lip read.

Mobile Data and Broadband Costs

The high bandwidth required for video calling also means that joining online meetings using a mobile connection can consume a lot of data and become potentially costly. The more participants there are, the more data required. Add in screen-sharing and the data used is even higher. The amount varies by platform, but can reach up to [2.4GB per hour](#).

It is important to help people who are new to using mobile data to understand how much data costs and how different activities use different amounts. One person told us that they had got a tablet two weeks previously but had used up all their data: *“I think we might [have problems with the cost of the internet] because we have run out of data but I don’t know how much it costs or if we can afford more”*. They added it would be helpful to have *“Some way of knowing how much we are spending on data”*. This emphasises that a key aspect of developing people’s online skills is empowering people with the knowledge to be able to manage their data effectively.

We also heard that some self-advocates struggled to understand how to get the best value for money from their mobile data or broadband contract, and how much difference it could make to switch contracts. There is a lack of easy read information about this and, although there are price comparison websites, these require data to access and are only available if you are already online.

It should be noted that disabled people are liable to be disproportionately affected by cost considerations: disabled people are [around 50% more likely to be living in poverty than non-disabled people](#). The average household [spends £37.25 per month on broadband](#). People getting online for the first time face higher initial connection costs for broadband; for people who do not currently have a landline the connection cost alone can be up to £140. This can mean that the actual cost is considerably higher than advertised.

For Council engagement work, one option is to use budgets previously used for participants’ travel expenses to purchase data so people can participate. However, it is important to develop policies that ensure this is fair. People who have less disposable income may purchase data because they consider internet access a priority, while others who have more disposable income may prefer to spend their money in other ways. According to Lloyds Bank UK Consumer Digital Index 2020, of those who were offline, 38% of people said they spent their money on other

things, compared to the 25% of people who said that it was too expensive.

Access to Devices and Affordability

Some forum members and self-advocates did not have access to a working device, and faced an additional outlay investing in new equipment or paying for repairs. Device costs can vary hugely and people told us they felt there was a lack of clear information about the choices available to people when purchasing digital equipment and the costs involved. Clear information would support people to understand the benefits of particular devices and make decisions about the most cost-effective equipment to buy.

NYCC has recently launched a project to re-use donated laptops and other devices for people in the county experiencing digital exclusion. A range of other tablet loan schemes exist, though some of them have restrictions, such as working with older people. Schemes that include 4G packages in the loan are useful and remove the barrier of data costs.

Joining by Telephone

For people who are offline, the opportunity to join online meetings by telephone has been vital and has meant that members can continue to participate. However, it is important to remember that this still has a cost consideration, with most dial-in options charged at local-rate. Our participation meetings last between 90 and 150 minutes and, particularly on mobile, charges can quickly mount up or consume a large proportion of a person's minutes. Even for people on inclusive landline packages, calls of over 60 minutes can start accruing charges of around 15p/minute; some local disability forum members told us they rang off and rejoined to avoid this.

We have reallocated travel expenses to ensure that people are not out of pocket, but we should be mindful that claiming back expenses requires people to make an initial outlay that may not be within everyone's means. Several video conferencing platforms offer a way around this by means of Freephone numbers or "Call Me" facilities, whereby the participant receives a call joining them to the meeting. These have the potential to reduce administrative load as well as making participation more straightforward and inclusive.

Top Tips

- Have a back-up plan if connection is poor. If audio or video quality is poor, consider using the chat box.
- Make people aware they can join by phone.
- Familiarise yourself with tablet and other technology loan schemes.
- Review expenses policies in light of phone and data usage.

Online meetings: finding the right platform

Finding the right platform is key to ensuring a successful, accessible meeting. Different platforms offer different functions that may be more or less important to different participants.

Most platforms have a chat box. This can be useful in enabling people who have limited speech to participate. However, it can cause issues for people who use screen readers, as one disability forum member told us:

“The only drawbacks are any comments that participants type appear on my screen as text, then of course my screen reader reads them aloud! This then cuts across current conversation, so I miss parts of it. I can’t find a way of overcoming this. So if text appears on screen say to help hearing impaired participants it becomes a real problem.”

Some platforms such as Zoom allow users to “pin” another user’s video to their screen and maximise it. This is useful for enabling BSL users to see an interpreter clearly. MS Teams and Zoom both offer automatic live closed captions, which can be toggled on/off by each individual user. However, this functionality is currently not available to participants joining NYCC MS Teams meetings if they do not have a Microsoft account. If sufficiently accurate, captions may be useful for some people with hearing loss, but it should be noted they do not reflect the richness of Deaf communication. We have noticed that several D/deaf members of disability forums have stopped joining online meetings, perhaps reflecting the communication difficulties that the digital medium creates. One local disability forum member told us:

“[T]here are a lot of things people don’t understand regarding a deaf persons communication with people, they use up to 90% body language, facial expression all these things are missing when you do online communication. Certainly it would help to have visual text because you would be able to follow the conversation however electronic

communication is a poor substitute for personal warm of people who prevents the loneliness and isolation of deafness.”

The P&E team have used GoToMeeting for disability forum meetings throughout the pandemic. Ease of use was a key driver in this - people can click a single URL to join on any device. The controls have clear icons and the platform prompts the user with messages such as reminding them they are muted. When a person is speaking their square lights up, drawing others' attention to it.

People told us that they found Skype and Skype for Business difficult to use:

“[I] personally found it a real fuff. Poor colour definition, sound not great and drop outs. Joining someone else's business Skype by invite was also complicated. Poor picture visibility on phone app.”

Some independently constituted local disability forums opted to use Zoom. They told us that they found it the most straightforward to use and that members were already set up to use it. They felt that needing to set up another account to use a different platform could put people off and be a barrier to engagement. This highlights another factor to consider when deciding which platform to use. Another North Yorkshire Disability Forum member told us that they had had to learn how to use a lot of different platforms because the various meetings they had joined all used different software. This can create an additional hurdle for people getting to grips with online meetings for the first time. One disability forum member suggested that tablet loans could be used to help people, with the meeting software pre-installed and meeting papers available at the touch of a button via SharePoint, to make document transfer easier.

Both GoToMeeting and Zoom offer a range of viewing options. For laptop users this includes a grid view that shows all participants on-screen at once, in equal-sized boxes. Disability Forum members told us they enjoyed being able to see each other in real time, helping to re-create some of the in-meeting relationships. Other local disability forum members told us that this was a really important feature for them and that platforms which did not offer this option made it harder to engage and more difficult to manage the meeting. They also told us that it was useful to be able to see people's facial expressions. Reinforcing this, people who joined by telephone said it was hard not being able to see people's body language.

However, on GoToMeeting, this function works differently for users of smartphone and tablet devices. Only a small number of participants can be viewed on screen at once. This can make it more difficult for people with hearing loss who need to be able to read speakers' lip patterns, facial expressions and body language. A local disability forum chair also told us it made it difficult to manage the meeting effectively as they could not see people who had their hand up and it was harder to recognise when people had arrived after the meeting had started. They told us that they preferred the viewing options on Zoom that allow participants to scroll through people's videos.

The grid layout also helps to address the potential for power imbalances. Skype for Business only shows a few participants on-screen at a time—typically those who are speaking—and Microsoft Teams can show some people in larger boxes and others in smaller ones. This can seem to privilege and reinforce dominant voices, and side-line people with limited speech.

In addition, in some platforms the boxes move around on the screen depending on who is speaking, which can be confusing for some participants.

At the same time, some people told us they found lots of people on screen visually overwhelming, so it is key to ensure that participants can understand the different viewing options and select what works best for them. Some people preferred to turn their camera off. Other people told us that it can be harder to engage when you cannot see people and it can make it more difficult for people who need to lip read. As with in-person meetings, it is key to understand and consider how you can best balance differing access needs.

Alongside selecting the right platform, it is important to review the meeting rules to ensure everyone has opportunity to contribute and to help make the meeting accessible to everyone. For example, we were told that for people with hearing loss and who rely on lip-reading it is very important that only one person speaks at a time, as it can be frustrating if people speak over each other.

Safeguarding and security also need reviewing. For example, private messaging can be useful to keep meetings running smoothly, including supporting the Chair, but it can effectively create a “closed room” for conversations. When configuring online meeting settings it is also

important to strike a balance between security and accessibility. It might make it more secure to have a password and to change the meeting ID each time. However, it also makes it less accessible, particularly for people with sight loss, a learning disability or learning difficulties like dyslexia.

When looking for an accessible platform back in March 2020, we were aware of concerns about the security of some platforms, and considered this when selecting GoToMeeting.

Top Tips for effective online meetings

- **Do your research.** Find out what participants' needs are and, wherever possible, select the platform that best meets them. If you need partners from other organisations to join, check if they have any restrictions on which platforms they are able to access.
- **Number of participants.** If you have too many people present it will be difficult to manage the meeting so that everyone can contribute. The ideal number will depend on the type of meeting but, generally, we would recommend a maximum of 15-20 people for working meetings with active discussion.
- **Meeting length.** People can tire quicker than in face-to-face meetings so do not make meetings too long. We would recommend an hour and half, or two hours with a break, as a maximum.
- **Agenda.** Do not be overambitious about how much you can fit in. It can take longer to get through each issue in online meetings, particularly if there are technological difficulties.
- **Offer a 1-1 practice session before the meeting**—this allows people to get used to the platform and enables you to troubleshoot any problems beforehand. This can require a significant amount of time so ensure you plan accordingly and be prepared to offer follow-up sessions.
- **Ensure that participants are familiar with different features and layouts ahead of the meeting.** This will help people configure the experience to suit them and participate fully.
- **Find out what the platform looks like on different devices.** The screen is often laid out differently on smartphones, tablets and laptops. Being familiar with the various layouts will help you better support people remotely.

- **Provide people with accessible information** – let people know how to take part in the meeting, how to use the platform and different functions like the mute button and chat box, and what to do if they have problems.
- **Review your meeting rules** to make sure they allow everyone to have their say.
- **Remind people to use the mute button when they are not talking.** This is especially important to improve the sound quality for people with hearing loss.
- **Encourage people to participate by using the chat box as well as by speaking.** Make sure that someone is keeping an eye on the chat box and can feed this into the meeting as well as the minutes.
- **Consider safeguarding.** Set ground rules about how to use the messaging function and ensure that the meeting organiser always checks the chat log after the meeting.
- **Open the meeting room 10-15 minutes before the meeting starts.** Encourage people to join early so they can resolve issues and get settled.
- **Make sure people have a contact number for the meeting organiser in case of problems.**
- **Support phone participants** – remember they cannot see who else is in the meeting or anything being shared on screen and they cannot read the chat box.
- **Offer people different ways to signal that they would like to speak** – not everyone can raise their hand, including people who are joining by phone.
- **Be aware that sharing documents on screen can reduce accessibility for some participants** – keep the use of presentations to a minimum.

Conclusions

Feedback from forum members and self-advocates highlights a range of positives from online engagement activities. For some people, the lack of travel improved accessibility and led to increased participation in local, national and international activities. Self-advocates felt proud of developing new skills and, at a time when people's routines were disrupted and face-to-face contact has been limited, access to online activities has helped support some people's mental wellbeing—though it

should be noted many people told us how much they missed meeting face-to-face.

However, disabled people continue to face a range of digital exclusion and accessibility challenges with online engagement. Barriers such as affordability disproportionately affect disabled people, while issues such as poor connectivity have accessibility impacts. Self-advocates in particular told us it was important to have support from service providers to get online and that they wanted accessible information to help develop their digital skills.

Careful planning is required to ensure that online meetings consider and address the accessibility needs of all participants. This includes not only selecting the most appropriate platform for the audience, but reviewing meeting rules to ensure they work for everyone in this new format.

Below we have made a number of key recommendations that North Yorkshire County Council may wish to consider as part of its ongoing work to improve digital inclusion and accessibility.

Recognising that there is much good work already underway, North Yorkshire County Council and other providers to consider any new or additional actions required to enable the following:

- Digital inclusion training is accessible to disabled people, including ensuring that the staff/volunteers who deliver it have the skills to support people with a range of disabilities.
- Digital skills are included in skills development and transition for young people with SEND.
- Accessible information is made available to help people to understand how to stay safe online and colleagues who support people are aware and make use of it.
- Guidance is made available to providers and individuals about supporting people to safely access technology and online content, including enabling people to have choice and control in use of technology.
- Information, advice, guidance and training is available to people about managing data and choosing and switching broadband or mobile data providers.
- People can access opportunities to try out different technologies and devices.

- Allow flexibility and choice when selecting video conferencing platforms to take account of people’s accessibility requirements and familiarity with certain platforms.
- Increase access to affordable devices, for example via digital inclusion initiatives, and ensure that the criteria for access are sufficiently inclusive and the opportunity to access such initiatives is well-communicated.
- There is the facility for people to join online meetings by dialling in by telephone. Support to use technology is considered within the commissioning of care and support packages.

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