Organising online activities and events

Ideas and tips for planning activities and events to hold online

Organising an activity or event online requires the same basic steps as an in-person event or activity. The keys to success are to be clear about what you are trying to achieve and to plan it well. This information sheet covers:

- Being clear about your objectives
- Choosing activities to meet your objectives
- Examples of types of activities:
    - Online classes
    - Small hobby groups or drop-ins
    - Support groups
    - Celebration events
    - Information sharing sessions
    - 'Challenges' or classes for individuals
- Planning well and being clear about the technology

Be clear about your objectives

Discuss in your group what you want your event or activity to achieve. If your group is unable to meet in-person at all, you can have this discussion in a meeting using one of the online tools we describe in our information sheet *Video and telephone meeting tools.*

At this stage, try not to get distracted by thinking about what might be technologically possible. Try to simply focus on the needs of your members or community. As with an in-person activity, you may have a wide range of objectives, for example:

- Enabling people to connect with each other;
- Encouraging physical activity and exercise;
- Entertainment and having fun;
- Sharing information about practical needs, services and support;

- Creating a place for people to talk about emotional problems and share experiences;

- Learning specific knowledge or skills;

- Celebrating a particular festival or annual event;

- Maintaining traditional, cultural or religious practices;

- Raising awareness;

- Raising money;

- Cultivating a sense of belonging and community.

You may be choosing to do an online activity as a replacement for activities you would usually do in-person but are now unable to e.g. because you don't want to risk spreading Covid-19. In this case it is tempting to simply try to replicate your usual in-person activity online. Sometimes it might be really valuable to do this, but sometimes it might not be! This is why it is useful to think through your objectives first, and recognise that: 1) your main objectives might be different now than they were when you originally decided which in-person activities to do; or 2) an online version of the same activity does not achieve the same things that the in-person activity does.

Choose activities to meet these objectives

Once your group is clear what your members most need at this time, and therefore what your objectives are, there are some other factors to consider when choosing which online activities you are going to do. Things to consider include:

- There are lots of different online tools that can be used to allow people to do things together without physically being in the same space. Different tools have different features that will be useful for different activities. See *Video and telephone meeting tools* for details of some of these features.
- Different members of your group will have different levels of confidence with these tools or access to the devices needed to use them. To be able to use video, participants will always need a smart phone, tablet, or computer (with camera). Lots of tools also allow people to call in to the meeting by phone, so they can hear the meeting and speak, but they will not be able to see anyone else or be seen on video.
- When people meet in-person, there is a lot of informal chat – for example, at the beginning or end of a class, while waiting for the kettle to boil, or over a shared meal. This informal chat is often central to people feeling connected and supported. When an activity is online, people cannot mingle or chat to each other one-to-one: when someone wants to say something, they must say it to the whole group. This means that coming together online is a very different experience than coming together in-person. Giving your online activities structure so that everyone has a chance to participate or contribute

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something out loud can really help people to feel included, connected and supported.

- Different types of activities work well for different numbers of participants. The number of people participating in an activity has as much of an impact online as it would if you were running it in-person.
- When people interact online, they are more likely to accidentally talk over one another. This means that it can be frustrating and unsatisfying to simply bring people together to have a chat. If you have more than 4 people meeting together online, it is useful to add in some structure.

There are an almost endless variety of activities and events that you could do online. Here are some examples of the types of activities your group could choose, and some circumstances in which you might want to choose them.

Online classes

Your group might usually run regular in-person classes or activity sessions, for example, language classes, drama, dance, a choir, sports for children, or exercise sessions for a particular group like women or the over-50s. If your main objectives are still relevant to the specific activity, e.g. learning, physical activity, creativity, fun, you might want to decide to run these classes online.

If one of your objectives is also to enable people to connect with one another, you should think about how this will happen online. People will not simply be able to chat to one another, and sometimes the activity itself might be quite individual. For example, if you are running an online exercise class, all participants will be watching the same instructor on their screens (or listening to the same instructor, in the case of those who can only connect by phone) and knowing that they are all doing the class together, but the participants cannot interact with each other. You might want to consider adding some time onto the beginning or end of the class specifically for people to talk to one another. If there are only a few people in the class (up to about 4), you could just have an 'open' space for the group to chat. If there are more people, it is useful to add some structure, for example, by each participant having a turn to 'check in' about how they are or to reflect on what they enjoyed about the class.

For most online classes you would ideally organise a video-based class, but will still be able to accommodate people who are only able to join by voice (phone call). See *Video and telephone meeting tools* for details of free online tools. Jitsi, Zoom, Whereby and Skype are the most suitable for running online classes.

If you have a teacher or a 'tech host' (someone who is responsible for organising and running the technological side of things during the class) who is comfortable to use them, there are a variety of features that may be useful to help structure and teach the class. These are not complicated to use but you might want to learn them slowly and add them into your classes one by one. These features include:

Break-out rooms: you can split the class into smaller groups to discuss or work on a particular task. The teacher can visit each of these breakout rooms.

Screen-sharing: the teacher, or any one of the participants, can share what is on their screen with the rest of the group, so you could all look at the same website, a YouTube video, a Word document onto which the teacher is writing, etc.

Whiteboard: the teacher, or any of the participants, can share a 'whiteboard' on their screen that everyone else can see. They can draw on this or write on this in the same way that you would use a whiteboard or blackboard in a physical classroom.

Small hobby groups or drop-ins

If a key objective for your group is to enable people to come together for connection and for broad emotional support, you might want to organise small online sessions that last for 2-3 hours where people can come and go. You could organise these around a specific activity that individuals can do, for example, knitting, drawing, or crafting, or say it is "all inclusive" and people just can bring any hobby they like. You could also welcome people who just want to have a cup of coffee in company.

You can use any of the online tools detailed in *Video and telephone meeting tools* to run a small hobby group like this. You just need one volunteer to organise the meeting and keep it open for the length of time you have decided. This is a particularly good activity for people in your group who can only use audio as they don't have the means to connect using video. The idea is that phone lines are open while people are getting on with their own activity, ideally with phones on speaker-phone, and this gives people an opportunity to chat in an informal way. People can talk about problems and get direct support from one another, or they can just make small-talk and feel comfort in being connected to their community. This works best with a small number of people, and is one of the types of online activities that can work well without being formally structured.

Support groups

Your group might usually bring people together to share experiences and support one another about specific challenges. In this case, you might choose to run online groups that aim to do the same thing. It can make people feel safer and more connected to be able to see one another in these groups – so they can see other people nodding along when they are sharing their experiences, for example – so a video-based tool is generally preferable. But depending on the technology your group have access to, and the number of people you want to bring together, it is possible to run a support group using any of the tools detailed in *Video and telephone meeting tools.*

If there are only a few people coming together (up to about 4), you could just have an 'open' space for the group to chat. If there are more people, it is useful to add some structure, for example, by each participant having a turn to 'check in' about how they are or perhaps to share their thoughts on a particular topic or question. If you have more than 4 people but would still like to have an 'open' space where people can talk whenever they would like to, instead of going round each participant, it is useful to agree a system where people indicate they would like to talk e.g. by raising their hand physically or using the "raise hand" option that some online tools have. A facilitator can then let the group know whose turn it is to speak, and this prevents the frustration of lots of people trying to talk at the same time – which happens a lot more online than it does in-person!

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Celebration events

If your group would like to celebrate a particular festival, maintain the practice of coming together at a certain time of year, or if you just want to bring everyone together for fun and to connect, you might want to organise a larger online event for a lot of people. Zoom, Jitsi, Google Meet, Skype or Microsoft Teams are the most suitable tools for this.

If you are planning to bring together a lot of people online, it is really important to have some good structure and a specified facilitator(s) to run the event. It is really difficult to facilitate an event for lots of people where they can only hear each other, so it is best to use a video-based tool. If some participants can only join via audio, this will be ok too, but it is important not to forget about them and to make sure that they get a chance to speak if they would like to. There are lots of activities you could do during such an event, including:

- **Games that are visual**. Some traditional British games that work well over video and for a lot of participants are 'musical statues', 'charades', 'just a minute', and 'Pictionary' (using the whiteboard function on Zoom).
- **Quiz games**
- **Bingo**. You could organise your own bingo game with custom words instead of numbers, that are relevant to the festival you are celebrating. Make sure you think through in advance how you are going to get your bingo cards to each player.
- Having a **go-round** to all of the participants, asking them each to answer something specific such as: one really positive moment they have had in the last week, something that made them laugh recently, or ask everyone to come to the event wearing a hat and then get everyone to tell you about their hats. There is no end to the possibilities for questions like this, just think about what might be fun for your group or what might be relevant to the particular festival you are celebrating. If you have a really large number of people at your event, you might not have time to go round to every person in which case you could ask for volunteers. You could also start by hearing answers from some people, then go on to another activity, and come back to hear from others.
- **Scavenger hunt**. You can set a challenge for people to go and collect certain things from around their house within a set amount of time. You could either give participants a list of common household objects, or a particular colour (e.g. you have 2 minutes to go and get 3 objects that are red), or you could ask them to go and find something specific like 'an object that always makes you smile'. People can then do a 'show and tell' where they explain to everyone else what the object is and why it makes them smile.
- **Performances** of music, poetry, storytelling, dance etc. You could ask certain participants to have prepared something to perform at the event, or you could use the 'screen share' function to show a video of a performance that has been pre-recorded by members of your group.
- **Break-out rooms**. If it is a large event, it can be nice to break people up into smaller groups for some time, maybe 10-15 minutes, where they will have an opportunity to just chat and make small talk with the other people in their break-out room.

Think about how long you would like to make the event, and then decide which activities you are going to do and in what order. Remember that everything takes

longer online than it would do in-person, and that being online can be very tiring so you don't want to make the event too long. 90 minutes to 2 hours is probably the maximum length of time to aim for.

Background noise becomes more problematic as the number of people at an activity increases, so for a large event, it is advisable to ask everyone to have their microphones on mute until it is their turn to talk. This is why it is so important to have structured activities if you are bringing together lots of people.

If your group usually raises money from events, or would like to, you can also sell tickets or ask for donations to come to online events. You can use an online fundraising tool[1] to set up a place where people can donate, or you could use a site like Eventbrite[2] to sell tickets to your event. You could choose to only send the joining details or link to the event to people who have bought tickets, or you could ask for voluntary donations depending on what your group thinks is most appropriate for its objectives.

Information sharing sessions

If you would like to share important information with your members, and it is not suitable to just do it in writing, you could organise an online session. You could use tools including Jitsi, Zoom, Skype and Whereby to give presentations to a large number of people via video, audio, and screen-sharing. You could then run a structured question and answer session, or give people the option to contact your committee or particular volunteers later on.

'Challenges' or classes for individuals

If one of your group's key objectives is to help people learn particular skills or knowledge, you might want to set up a series of lessons that people can go through at their own pace. This could be useful, for example, for learning languages, or for practising specific skills for a sport or creative activity. Lessons could be made by your teacher as a video or as written instructions, and students could be encouraged to help each other out or be put into pairs or small groups to check in with each other about their progress.

Your group might also decide to set 'challenges' for individuals as a way to provide entertainment and fun and to keep people feeling connected to the group without having to gather online at a specific time. You could ask people to video themselves doing the activity (which can be done on a smart phone) or talking about having done the activity, and to share the video with everyone else in the group. A good way to do this is on your group's Facebook page. There are lots of different types of activities you might want to challenge people with, including physical, creative, or very random! For example, you could challenge people to find an object which has become important to them during lockdown and to make a video showing the object and explaining its importance. Or you could challenge people to complete a certain amount of running or sea swimming or walking, or ask them to come up with a dance

[1] https://www.resourcecentre.org.uk/service/online-fundraising-tools/

[2] https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/

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or a poem about a particular topic. The collection of videos that is produced becomes something that is really enjoyable for other members of the group to watch. If you have a Facebook page, you could organise a "watch party" where you can invite your group members to get together at a certain time and watch all the videos together.

If one of your group's objectives is to raise money, you could ask group members to get sponsored for their challenges, or you could use videos of the challenges as part of an online fundraising campaign. See our information on *Fundraising ideas* for details of ways to organise online fundraising and sponsored activities.

Plan well and be clear about the technology

The key to organising and hosting successful online events and activities, of any type, is to plan them carefully and thoroughly. Just as you would for an in-person activity, be clear within your group what will need to be done during the event and who is responsible for each thing. For every online activity, it is a good idea to have one or two people who act as the 'tech hosts'. They are responsible for setting up the meeting online, facilitating the use of any special features you want to use, and making sure participants are muted when you need them to be. The tech hosts should make sure they have tested out the technology in advance, including any special features you will be using.

It is always best to keep the technological side of things as simple as possible – even if many of your participants are comfortable and familiar with the tool you are using. Make sure that you have thought in detail about what will make the experience easy and enjoyable for your participants, and take the time to prepare clear step-by-step instructions in advance. For example, in most online tools, each participant can choose what they are seeing on their own screen – they may choose to see small pictures of everybody, or they may choose to see just to see one big picture of whoever is talking. Think through which view will be best, and explain to your participants clearly how to choose this view. Remember that instructions will be different depending on what type of device people are using, e.g. smart phone, laptop, tablet, desktop computer.

Familiarise yourself with our troubleshooting tips[3] and general points about using online tools in *Video and telephone meeting tools.*

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[3] https://www.resourcecentre.org.uk/information/video-and-telephone-meeting-tools/#trouble