

## What has the Bristol Support Hub for Older People learnt about online and telephone group activities?

The Covid-19 pandemic meant that face-to-face group activities could no longer take place, causing a number of organisations in Bristol and across the country to offer these activities online or via the telephone instead.

In order to inform service delivery and future commissioning, Bristol Ageing Better (BAB) has captured the **collective learning and recommendations about online and telephone group activities from seven organisations working with older people in Bristol** during this time. These organisations are all part of the Bristol Support Hub for Older People.

This collective learning comes from:

- ▶ **Active Ageing Bristol:** Currently supports local practitioners to develop physical activity groups which can be accessed online and via the telephone.
- ▶ **Age UK Bristol and LinkAge:** LinkAge is the brand within Age UK Bristol which leads on keeping people connected, active and independent. During the pandemic, LinkAge has led the virtual activity sub-group of the Support Hub to develop virtual activities, such as the telephone groups, with other Support Hub members. Age UK Bristol holds the contract for the conference call system used by the telephone groups.
- ▶ **Alive Activities:** Currently delivering online activity sessions to care home residents via video call, as well as telephone memory cafés for people with dementia who are living at home.
- ▶ **Alzheimer's Society:** Currently delivering two Singing for the Brain groups, one activities group and one memory café per week for people living with dementia, accessible online or via the telephone.
- ▶ **Playlist for Life:** Currently offer a 'Soundtrack of Your Life' weekly telephone group for anyone experiencing memory loss or dementia, alongside a relative or carer.
- ▶ **The Exercise Club Clifton:** Currently offering online group exercise classes, which can also be accessed via the phone.
- ▶ **The Reader:** Currently offering Shared Reading groups online and via the phone.



# Executive Summary

## Who is attending these online and telephone group activities?

Many of these organisations have been able to **engage with new people who did not previously attend** their face-to-face group activities. By taking place online or via the telephone, **it removes some of the common barriers** experienced with face-to-face activities, and therefore **may reach individuals with higher levels of social isolation**. It may also encourage individuals to **try out new types of activity** they would not feel confident trying in person.

However, many people who previously participated face-to-face **have not attended** the online or telephone group activities. This is due to a variety of reasons including through choice, the perception of it being a temporary offer during Covid-19 or as a result of other barriers. There has therefore **been a shift in who is now attending these group activities**.

## Strong facilitation is key

- ▶ When group activities are online or on the telephone, a **specific set of facilitation skills** are needed to ensure everyone feels able to participate and interact. These skills may be different to those required when in-person.
- ▶ Having a combination of some participants joining online and others joining via the phone can **make the group more accessible**. However it also creates **challenges around inclusion** which need careful management.
- ▶ **Informal social interaction** does not always occur naturally when a group is online or on the telephone, and **needs to be built into the activity structure**. Having this social interaction alongside the activity is often highly valued by participants.
- ▶ Online and telephone group activities can **require more structure and planning** behind the scenes than face-to-face groups. What may previously have worked well in-person may now be experienced by participants as frustrating or stressful. Central to a strong structure is the **facilitator feeling confident with the technology**.
- ▶ Remember that **each individual person and group are different**. Some participants want to be informed and entertained, others just want to talk. This needs to be built into the session.

## Virtual groups are not exact replicas of face-to-face groups

Groups which take place online or via the telephone **should not be viewed in the same way** as face-to-face groups. Some participants will find that these groups are more suitable for them (e.g. accessibility), while others will find them less suitable (e.g. availability of equipment). They are **different experiences, not like-for-like replicas or lower-quality versions** of face-to-face groups.

## Feedback and co-design

Many of the feedback mechanisms used in face-to-face group settings **can also be built into** online or telephone groups, although there can be **some challenges**, for example non-verbal feedback.

## Data governance and privacy

Online and telephone group activities need to consider **how data is managed in this context**, as it involves different data processes and privacy considerations.

## Who is attending these online and telephone group activities?



### Reaching people who were not previously connected to their face-to-face activities

Many of these organisations have been **able to engage with new people** who did not previously attend their face-to-face group activities. By taking place online or via the phone, these activities **remove some of the common barriers** that can be experienced with face-to-face activities, particularly around **geography and transport**. One organisation has been able to expand beyond South West England to engage individuals in group activities in other parts of the UK.

Some organisations have found that these new participants **often had higher levels of social isolation**, both before and during the pandemic. These individuals often found out about the activities through the Bristol Support Hub for Older People, GP practices, social prescribing services or other local organisations, **highlighting the value of partnership working and cross-organisational signposting**.

However, while the pandemic led some individuals to become aware of the services and group activities available, **it remains difficult to communicate what is available to those who do not access any services at all**. Others may experience **confidence barriers** when the group activity is facilitated by an organisation or individual who is not already familiar to them. It can be a **daunting experience** to join a group of new people, using a new activity format or piece of technology, facilitated by an unfamiliar organisation or individual.

On the other hand, the specific circumstances of the Covid-19 lockdown encouraged some individuals to try out new forms of group activity that they would have been unlikely to sign up for previously, feeling that they **'might as well give it a go' in these unique circumstances** and surprising themselves by their level of enjoyment or achievement. It may be that online or phone group activities are perceived as a **more accessible way of trying out something new**.

Some of these new participants may move to face-to-face group activities once these fully resume, viewing the online/telephone group activities as **something they are temporarily involved in during the pandemic**. However, it is likely that **others will prefer to remain virtual**, either through choice or due to other barriers preventing face-to-face engagement.

## 2

### A drop out of some people who previously attended face-to-face activities

Key learning is that **online or telephone group activities do not appeal to everybody**. Many of these organisations initially wanted to set up online/telephone group activities so that they could continue engaging with their existing members during the pandemic. However there have been varying experiences in whether these members continued to engage.

For some organisations, the majority of previous participants continued to participate in online/telephone group activities. However, for other organisations, the opposite was true and the majority of previous participants did not want to attend group activities either online or on the telephone.

There was **a variety of reasons for this**, including being put off by the technology, screen-fatigue, wishing to have privacy during this time, and simply having less interest in an activity that is not face-to-face. In some cases, demand for online groups either decreased or remained steady over the course of the pandemic, compared to more consistent demand for telephone groups. Furthermore, Alzheimer's Society have noticed that people with dementia who live alone and who do not have close contact with a carer may perhaps be less able to take part in these virtual activities compared to attending face-to-face sessions.

It is therefore important to remember that **there are still lots of people who are not participating in these online or telephone group activities**, either through choice or as a result of other barriers.

**Strong facilitation is key**

## 1

### Enabling all attendees to participate in an activity session

Given that there are a wide range of activity videos available online, these organisations feel there is a reason why individuals have chosen to join a live interactive session instead; they offer very different experiences and have a different impact.

As with face-to-face activities, it is important to **make sure that everyone feels able to participate and interact at a level which suits them**. However, a **specific set of facilitation skills** are needed when these group activities are online or on the telephone.

Methods of encouraging participation in this context include:

- ▶ Carefully **managing the size of the group**, setting a maximum limit or, if possible, using virtual **break-out rooms to create smaller group interactions**. The ideal group size will vary depending on the nature of the activity and whether individuals are participating via the telephone.
- ▶ If break-out rooms are used, it works best for **one group of participants to remain in the 'main' session** in case some people join late or if internet/phone problems mean they have to leave the session and re-join.
- ▶ **Not muting** participants unless it is completely necessary (for example due to background noise) so that individuals feel able to talk spontaneously.
- ▶ **Structuring the activity in a way which encourages participation**, while also ensuring people know whether it is fine to simply sit and watch if they wish to. This includes taking into account whether someone will be participating alongside another member of their household (for example a carer) at the same time and tailoring activities to this.
- ▶ Encouraging quieter participants to engage by **asking them a specific question** to bring them into the conversation.
- ▶ Trying to **minimise the amount that people talk over each other**, for example considering this within the structure of an activity or flagging it when it occurs and returning to the person who was originally speaking.

## 2

### A combination of participants joining online and on the phone

It is valuable to offer participants the option of joining the activity session either online (with a webcam) or via the phone (audio-only). This **makes an activity session accessible for those who don't have access to the internet, who don't have a webcam or who do not wish to be on a video call**. Furthermore, many group activities have the option of 'phoning people in' to the call, which can be valuable for those who need extra assistance with this aspect.

However, when this results in some participants joining via the internet and others joining via the telephone, **certain challenges can emerge**. Challenges include:

- ▶ It can be **tiring to hold a phone up to your ear** for the duration of an activity session (often around 1 hour). Some people will have the option of hands-free however others, particularly those using a landline, may not have this option.

- ▶ The participants who can see other people's videos are **likely to comment on something they can see on the screen** (e.g. someone getting up and dancing). Those joining via the telephone will not be able to see this, which may make them feel excluded.
- ▶ Those joining via the telephone will **not be able to view any shared-screen resources**. In some cases this can be overcome through **hard-copies being posted** to them in advance of the session. However, in other cases, hard-copies are not possible, for example if the content being shared is a video.

### 3

## Building informal social interaction into these group activities

Face-to-face group activities involve informal social interaction, for example while people are arriving in the room before the activity begins, or during a comfort break. However when a group activity takes place online or via the telephone, this **informal social interaction does not always occur naturally and needs to be built in to the activity structure**. These organisations have found that individuals value this informal group interaction and it has a different impact to one-to-one interaction.

Informal social interaction can be **facilitated through the use of break-out rooms**, particularly if it is possible to place people with those they already have some familiarity with (e.g. from previous activity weeks, or from the face-to-face activities before the pandemic). In some cases, these break-out rooms are facilitated by a volunteer in order to make sure the participants feel supported with the activity and that the conversation flows.

It can also be facilitated through **creating an informal friendly atmosphere where individuals feel comfortable enough to make conversation and contribute spontaneously**. This atmosphere can be modeled by the facilitator themselves being informal, for example telling jokes early on in the activity and encouraging others to bring jokes to share too. It can also be created when a group activity involves household items (for example using tins of food as weights) as this sparks conversation and acts as an icebreaker. This atmosphere is easier to create when the group is smaller.

These organisations have observed friendships developing, beyond those who had previously met face-to-face before the pandemic. It has enabled different people to get to know each other and **bond as a virtual group, rather than solely being a continuation of the existing face-to-face groups**.

The use of break-out rooms can be particularly important for informal social interaction when a large number of participants join the activity session as many people would not feel comfortable chatting within a large group.

# 4

## High level of structure behind the scenes

While the participants may experience these group activity sessions as informal and relaxed, they work best when there is a **high level of structure behind the scenes**.

This structure is even more important when facilitating groups online or via the phone than it is when groups are face-to-face. It is also **particularly important for larger groups**. While these organisations want the activity groups to be user-led, this is **achieved in a different way with virtual groups** than it would be with in-person. What may previously have worked face-to-face may now be experienced by participants as frustrating or stressful. Central to a strong structure is the **facilitator feeling confident with the technology**

Recommendations from these organisations include:

- ▶ **Practice with the technology first before going 'live'** as group activity sessions can be very fast-paced for the facilitator. Some of the organisations provide facilitators with **training and a handbook** in using the relevant pieces of software.
- ▶ For telephone groups it is essential to **use an online dashboard**. It helps with monitoring who is on call, and makes it easier to see who is saying more and who is quieter and perhaps needs more support or encouragement.
- ▶ It works well for **facilitators to work in pairs**, with one person leading on the activity content and group interaction, while the second person manages the technology behind the scenes. This second facilitator can be responsible for muting people when there is background noise, allocating people to break-out groups and providing any one-to-one assistance individuals may need with the technology.
- ▶ A challenge of online group activities is that it is **reliant on the facilitator having a good internet connection**. This risk can be mitigated when facilitating in pairs.
- ▶ If using break-out rooms, it is more manageable to **pre-assign these at the start of the session** while people are still joining. It is easier to allocate participants one-by-one as they join the activity rather than trying to do it all at once at the point it is needed. This then creates a smooth experience for the participants.
- ▶ If possible, it works well for the **facilitator to have two computer screens**, when individuals are joining online. The first screen can show what the participants can see (e.g. speaker view, or shared screen), while the second screen can show the participants' videos in order for the facilitator to read their body language.
- ▶ It can be useful to send some **short written guidelines to participants before they join an activity for the first time**. These could include FAQs about the technology, but also group guidelines for example not talking over each other or specific ways that the group operates (e.g. saying your name before you speak).

## Virtual groups should not be seen as exact replicas of face-to-face groups

These organisations have observed some positive aspects of holding online and telephone group activities, compared to face-to-face groups, which would also be of value beyond the pandemic.

The **ability for online groups to screen-share** has opened up additional options for activities, particularly around sharing an image or online video. Through screen-share, all participants who are joining via the internet can easily **view the image/video at once** and there is **greater flexibility in what is shared**, for example being able to quickly respond to participant suggestions. This aspect of group activities had previously been challenging for some face-to-face groups due to requiring additional technology (such as a projector) or participants needing to pass around a handheld device to look at something individually (which could be time consuming). Some organisations have noticed that using screen-share has enabled people to connect with the activity and each other in a deeper way.

Similarly, individuals can **adjust their technology to suit their individual needs and preferences**, for example moving closer to the screen or setting the volume at a level that is right for them, rather than needing to compromise when face-to-face in order to find a middle-ground that's suitable for the majority.

Moreover, using this technology for online and telephone group activities has **given staff, volunteers and participants the chance to learn new skills**. Many participants are now using similar technology in other areas of their life as well, for example to connect with family and friends.

However, although there are many positives to online or telephone group activities, some organisations have also **observed a deterioration in the health of participants during the pandemic** which may be harder to address when groups are not face-to-face. The Exercise Club Clifton, for example, have noticed a decline in muscle strength for some people due to not having the right weights equipment available in their homes. Their physical activity sessions try to overcome this by using common household items (for example tins of food), but it is not a like-for-like replica. While this specific example is a challenge of equipment rather than because the activity is online (and could therefore be overcome if all participants were provided with equipment in their homes), **the right equipment can be provided more easily when the activity is face-to-face**.

Many of these organisations are interested in continuing to offer online and telephone group activities in the future, alongside face-to-face options. It seems that **online and telephone group activities have a different impact on the individual compared to face-to-face activities, and they tend to appeal to different people**.

## Feedback and co-design

These organisations gather feedback and input from participants in different ways. As with face-to-face group activities, it works well to **gather this input while a group activity session is still taking place and then in some cases follow-up** afterwards as well.

**Many of the feedback mechanisms used in face-to-face group settings** can be used with an online or telephone group too, for example directly asking the group what they would like to change about an activity, facilitating a group ideas brainstorm or making a note of suggestions which emerge from casual conversation. This **input can be encouraged by creating a friendly informal atmosphere** where participants feel comfortable sharing their views. However, as with face-to-face settings, there is a chance that individuals will simply say they enjoyed the activity but not give specific feedback or constructive suggestions. Specific questions are often needed in order to obtain the most valuable feedback.

It is possible that individuals might initially have lower expectations of online or telephone groups compared to face-to-face groups, and therefore be surprised by the high quality they experience. However **this surprise may potentially influence their feedback and lead to fewer constructive suggestions.**

**Non-verbal feedback** can also be gathered during a group activity from those who are participating via webcam, as to a certain extent the facilitator can still read participants' body language. However this is **not as comprehensive as when face-to-face**, particularly for groups involving physical activity as you can only view an exercise from one angle.

In addition to ongoing feedback while a group activity is taking place, many of the organisations running online or telephone group activities as part of the Bristol Support Hub for Older People use an **evaluation form which they designed collectively**. In order to encourage honest feedback from participants and reduce bias, **each organisation contacts participants from a group activity run by a different organisation in the subgroup.**

## Data governance and privacy

Groups which take place online or via the phone involve **different data processes and privacy considerations** compared to face-to-face groups.

Organisations facilitating these groups need to consider **how data is managed in this context**, for example whether a participant's telephone number is visible to others in the group or at what point the organisation may need to intervene in order to respect someone's privacy. There will also be **extra considerations for the facilitator** regarding screen-sharing and having other members of their household working from the same location.



Further BAB learning resources can be found at:  
<http://bristolageingbetter.org.uk/learning-so-far/>

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