

Guidance on Conducting Online Ministry with Children and Young People using a Digital Platform



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Parishes may want to consider engaging with children and young people using virtual platforms. Keeping everyone safe from a safeguarding perspective whilst using these platforms is essential. It is important to understand how to implement some simple steps that can contribute towards keeping children and young people safe online. The message should be clear and concise: 'think real world, think virtual world'.

We must apply the same rigorous levels of safeguarding to online as we do in person and there are some additional safeguarding measures that must be put in place to minimise specific online risk.

Deciding if ministry with children and young people online is in fact the best way forward or could this activity be better delivered by parents/carers with support materials to share: 'think will this ministry online meet children and young people's needs and provide real opportunities for them?'.

Working safely in the online world demands the same level of diligence and preparation as working face to face (e.g. undertaking a risk assessment, preparing codes of behaviour, gaining consent etc.). Guidance on these already exist in the [Parish Guidance Pack](#). [\(LinkTBC\)](#)

Is everyone involved aware of the potential risks of working online and have they discussed the procedures that should be in place to mitigate against these risks: "think danger, think solutions?"

Any parish group which wishes to engage in online ministry with children and young people should formally discuss this option with the chair of the Safeguarding Committee.

A preapproval checklist that the parish group leader in conjunction with the Safeguarding Committee

Chairperson should consider as a method of systematically ensuring that they have covered all the necessary steps before planning online ministry with children and young people.

Only on completion of the preapproval checklist, if it is decided that online ministry with children and young people is appropriate to take place, should the following then be considered.

Top Tips for Keeping Everyone Safe Online

Here is some advice and best practice on working safely with children and young people online. This should be read in conjunction with the Diocesan [Guidance on the Use of Technology](#). [\(LinkTBC\)](#)

Risk Assessment

Before an activity takes place, an appropriate risk assessment should be undertaken prior to engaging in any activity online. The online world is not an easier option and should not be regarded as such. Preparation for the success of an online session is crucial. The risk assessment should follow the Diocesan policy and procedures in relation to safeguarding and data protection. [\(See Risk Assessment Guidance and Data Privacy Notices\)](#). [\(LinkTBC\)](#)

Recruitment/Vetting

'Normal' volunteer rules apply whilst working online, such as recruitment and safeguarding processes – i.e. you need at least two safely recruited volunteers present who would normally have 'real time' contact with this group. Make sure both leaders are present online before children and young people arrive. Ideally use the same time slot of an existing group meeting.

Recording

Do not record the sessions. Most video conferencing software allows for the session to be recorded. Online sessions should never be recorded, as this could be a breach of data protection so avoid doing this, as you would need separate permission for data capture and there are all sorts of issues around storage, GDPR etc.

Approval for the Online Activity

You must have approval from the Safeguarding Committee/Parish Priest. Approval must be made in writing such as being documented in the minutes of the meeting.

Consent for the Online Activity

Consent from children or young people and parents/carers are prerequisites before any online activity takes place. If you do not get consent the child and young person will not be able to join the call.

In preparation for the activity, set up an email which explains what you are doing, the date and time of the online activity, which leaders are participating and provide some information as to what you will be doing, you need to explain what the consent is for.

Send out an [Online Ministry Consent Form \(LinkTBC\)](#) for completion by the child or young person and parent/carers which they can return using the email address provided.

Use a generic parish email address rather than personal email addresses. The proposed contract of work needs to be forwarded to parents/carers. For those who are over 16, what you do in the real world should apply, such as if you contact the young person directly and copied to parents/carers.

Email Addresses

Use parents/carers email addresses to send the meeting invite to, unless the young person is over 16.

When you send to the child and young person directly, copy the parents/carer's into the communication, as this ensures parents/carers are aware that it is happening and can set up the child and young person to access the session appropriately with any oversight if they want.

New Members

If new members want to join the group, they should have 'normal' group consent forms filled in as well. You will want them to come to the real group anyway when it meets face to face. Whatever steps you undertake in the 'real world' to verify the identity of participants needs to be applied in the online world. This needs to be explained to the participants.

If you are recruiting new leaders for this group, the [Safe Recruitment Process \(LinkTBC\)](#) must be followed before they can participate.

Codes of Behaviour

Appropriate behaviour for leaders in real time equally apply to online work with children and young people and should be in place and followed as you would expect in face to face activities e.g. appropriate use of language, behaviour, appropriate boundaries etc.

It might be worth a discussion with the leaders around this before the meeting happens. It might also be helpful to consult your existing [Codes of Behaviour \(LinkTBC\)](#) and check appropriateness for use online.

Contract/Rules

A contract of work/code/rules of behaviour needs to be discussed and agreed by participants, e.g., how participants are expected to behave, no recording of sessions, what the session will involve, no bullying during or after the activity, how people should respond, how to challenge aspects of the work if necessary, the use of mobile phones during the session, what to do if someone needs to be removed from the activity and future contact following the session. The rules governing each session should be discussed and agreed with the participants at the first session.

Other Considerations

Start Time

The online activity should not take place after 9:00pm.

Equipment

Avoid the use of personal IT equipment.

Supervision Ratios

Supervision ratios of adult to child and young person are the same regardless of the mechanism used, i.e. direct or online. For any online activity with children and young people at least two safely recruited volunteers need to be present.

Age of Participants

It is important to consider the age of your children and young people, both in terms of the age requirements of the service you are using, together with their ability to participate.

Different platforms have different restrictions in relation to age so ensure you take account of age restrictions within the terms and conditions of use of your chosen platform.

For children under 13 it is best practice for a parent/carer to be in the room when they are taking part in an online activity.

Social Media Platforms

Avoid the use of Skype/Facetime. These are social media platforms and as such, share contact details with all users. You may therefore inadvertently connect children and young people up with other people as an unintended consequence. There are a range of video conferencing platforms (such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams). When using these platforms, ensure you use the most up-to-date guidance for security.

Group Size, Location and Environment

Larger groups of children and young people may be more challenging to manage during an interactive online activity and so more presentational/educational approaches may be more suitable.

For live video and audio being used, there should be careful consideration of the location that everyone uses. Children and young people should be in more public places i.e. it is not appropriate for bedrooms/bathrooms to be used. Leaders should ensure that the background being used by them is

appropriate and that there is an appropriate dress code.

Data Usage

Be careful that children and young people do not incur surprising costs, e.g. mobile data access charges - (video uses significant amounts of data).

IT Security

Online Platforms, which allow for password access, only use password/passcode-protected meetings, create a new password for every meeting, and send details securely to participants (do not, for example, share details on social media). Passwords should only be sent to parents/carers of children and young people and not directly to the child and young person unless over 16. Joining details should only be shared with participants.

Inclusivity

Be inclusive. Are there children and young people who would benefit from being involved in the activity unable to do so due to adversity? for example poverty, disability, ethnicity? If so, consider how these could be addressed to assist with their involvement. Are there any children and young people from your group who would struggle to participate in the online activity and what extra support(s) can be put in place for them? If you have any child and young person involved who are not comfortable with technology try to help them get set up beforehand, by phoning them on a phone number supplied by a parent/carer and talking them through the steps. This will help make sure no-one is excluded.

Screen Shots

Screen shots of the virtual activity should not be taken without the expressed consent of parents/carer and the child and young person. Specific written permission must be sought from children, young people, and their parents/carers if photographs are to be published in any forum i.e. print or online.

IT language

Avoid the use of IT language such as Emojis as they can often be misinterpreted.

Videos

If videos are being used in the activity, be careful to check the content beforehand.

Other Devices

Consider what other devices are open during the ministry online by all participants and ensure these do not present a risk, e.g. Googlehome, Alexa.

Before the Activity Takes Places

- Do not advertise the meeting ID and password on publicly accessible forums. Instead, try to send direct email invites using parent/carer emails.
- Be aware of and sensitive to technical difficulties. There can be issues with speakers and microphones. The chances are children and young people will be familiar with technology and have no difficulties, leaders may have issues. Use the software with leaders first to try and sort out any issues and become familiar with the tool you are going to use.
- Do a trial run with a few people before the activity, so you can make this tool easy to use for everyone.
- Send instructions and any user guides (links above) to parents/carers.
- It may be useful to have a session with parent/carers first, to explain and answer questions and agree how online ministry will work.

During the Activity

- Welcome your group as people log in. It may take a little while for everybody to get online, so do not start until you think everyone is on.
- Have a welcome message at the front and any disclaimers e.g. 'Meeting in Progress'.
- Lock the meeting once all are joined.
- Disable private screen sharing. (If available).
- Disable options for private chat (if available) between participants. If participants need to

contact leaders, for example, if they are worried or have a concern, explain that they can do so using the email address used for the online activity.

- Remember to pause, give people time to speak, people are a little slower to respond online, than they are face-to-face. It may be helpful to ask individuals their thoughts on a question, so other people know somebody is going to speak.

Controlling the Meeting

Know what options you have available to control the meeting. For example:

Waiting Room feature

This allows the organiser to put participants into a 'Waiting Room'. This allows you to control when people join your meeting.

Putting someone on hold

If this happens to someone it is important that you contact them and explain the reason why. You should give them a time frame for when they will be added back into the group and discuss the guidelines/rules for engaging in the activity.

Disable Someone's Video

Organisers can turn someone's video off. This will allow hosts to block unwanted, distracting, or inappropriate gestures on video. Please write this up as an incident report.

Muting Participants

Hosts can mute/unmute individual participants or all of them at once. Hosts can block unwanted, distracting, or inappropriate noise from other participants.

Removing Someone from the Activity

If someone is removed it is important that you contact them after you have removed them and explain the reason why they have been removed. Once someone is removed, they cannot re-join. Please write this up as an incident report.

External Participants

If someone external to the group joins the activity, leaders should pause the session and address the issue.

Ending the Meeting

Make sure everyone knows that you are ending your time together, let them know to leave the online platform and then stop the meeting. Both leaders should remain online until all of the children and young people have logged off. Ensure that the platform used has been closed down.

After the Activity

- Thank everyone for joining with you.
- Encourage everyone to contact the activity leaders if needed via the agreed email address.

- Make sure everyone knows how you will be meeting again and where to find instructions for the next activity session.
- Always make a note/record of the activity, including the date, timing and who participated, including those that arrived/departed early or late.
- Delete the account details for the specific platform used for the activity.

REMEMBER: If anything of a safeguarding nature arises during the session, appropriate reporting procedures should apply.

Relevant Forms

SO15, SO16, SO17 & SO18

USEFUL RESOURCES

- **SBNI Online Safety Hub**
- **NSPCC Online Safety Advice**
- **INEQE – Online Safety**