
Online Clubs for Older People - Social and Digital Support

What's an Online Club?

In this guide, an Online Club could refer to any regular online meeting for older people on a video calling platform, like Zoom, Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. The aim is to get people together remotely and reduce social isolation, but they might learn and practice using digital skills along the way. Some sessions focus on a fun or interesting activity to engage people, with anything from cross-stitch and cooking to virtual museum tours and exercise classes.

Throughout the pandemic, organisations in our network have found new and unique ways to keep people connected using digital, and have learnt a lot about how to run a successful Online Club. We collected the following tips during co-design workshops with our network and conversations with the Older People's Panel.

Activities for Online Clubs

Each group will be different. You need to think about the people you are working with, their characteristics and their needs. There are almost endless activities and themes that you can try to make your Online Club enjoyable for the people you support.

- **Digital Skills Sessions**
 - Introduction to social media
 - Using google maps
 - Online banking
 - Safety online tips
 - How to identify and report scams
- **Large Group Sessions**
 - Bingo or quizzes
 - Sing-a-longs / virtual choir
 - Tai Chi, Zumba, armchair aerobics
 - Cooking demonstrations
 - Virtual Walking Groups
- **Guest Speakers**
 - Life Stories organisation
 - Local police
 - Local historians
 - Local / community celebrities
 - School children to tell stories
- **Small Group Sessions**
 - Knit and Natter
 - Family History Group
 - Model making group
 - Embroidery club
 - Book club

The Technical Side

- Hold one-to-one or small group practice sessions before the event. This will allow people to build confidence, and practice using the platform and its features (eg breakout rooms / mute).
- If possible, find out what device your participants will be using, and if they have any accessibility needs. This can help you deliver a more personalised learning experience.
- Rich Avison of Lincs Digital gives the advice, “Don't be too slick. We found that making mistakes together created a better space for everyone. It shows that the tech can be hard but not to panic. You can't break it.”
- Facilitating in pairs is a good idea in case one facilitator has connection issues.

Session Structure

- Have a plan for your session and guide timings for activities.
- One hour sessions are usually sufficient but some people might benefit from a shorter session (like people living with dementia).
- Using warm up questions can encourage participation, e.g. “What did you watch on TV last night?” These questions don't need to relate to the session, they're just about helping people relax.
- Consider using energisers such as playing music during breaks or asking fun discussion questions.
- Quizzes at the end can provide a roundup of the session, but make sure it's informal and doesn't seem like a test.

Facilitation of Sessions

- Get to know your participants and make notes about things you may need to consider, e.g. if someone is hard of hearing.
- Use break out rooms if you have large groups to encourage conversation and interaction.
- As a facilitator, even if you're not actively taking part in conversations you should always be monitoring the session. This will help you check that everyone is participating, or if someone looks like they might need a little extra support.
- Consider starting the session 15 minutes before the official start time. This can allow people time to log on, connect to video and sound, and feel ready to start the session.

Encouraging Positive Behaviours during sessions

- Establish the same ground rules as you would have in a face to face situation. For example, stating the session is a safe space, where all people can speak, share and will respect others.
- Try not to be formal. A relaxed approach, even a little humour, can help people feel more comfortable.
- Ask people to use the mute facility when they're not talking. This will help reduce background noise and encourage "turn taking" in an online conversation.
- If there were any issues during the session, contact people afterwards to check-in with them and try to resolve any problems.

Encouraging engagement

- Using listening activities can encourage conversation in a quiet group. For example, listening to music together can encourage people to start discussions.
- Allow the natural flow of conversation. For example, bring pets in if they disrupt the call rather than trying to ignore them.
- Advise attendees to use the gallery view so that they can see the whole group at the same time.

Getting the word out

- Ask your local GP surgeries, care providers and other organisations to help promote the sessions.
- Share details on local Facebook groups and other channels.
- Team up with other relevant local services (e.g. an exercise class) who might want to promote what they do via your Online Club.

Final Thoughts

Online Clubs are a great way to bring people together, particularly when they find it hard to get out of the house. There are loads of activities you can try to keep people engaged and entertained and to promote social interaction. Nevertheless, it's important to remember that video calls are often a whole new form of communication for older people, and it can take a while for people to feel comfortable not only with the tech, but with the new social rules and video call etiquette.