

Doing engagement online

The benefits of going digital

Taking public engagement online is increasingly popular and offers exciting opportunities. Connecting digitally allows attendees to join from the comfort of their home, and can remove barriers for those who may not be able to attend in-person activities due to access requirements, caring responsibilities and/or geographical distance.

It also offers new possibilities for how you can share your research and the people you can connect with. When thinking about online engagement, it is important to move beyond a general idea of Zoom talks or PowerPoint presentations and explore how digital can be dynamic, two-way and innovative.

Top tips: successful online formats

To help you think creatively about online engagement, here are just a few formats that work well:

- **Online performances** where attendees are given an active role e.g. as judges in a historic court case which is acted out live by a professional theatre troupe.
- **At-home experiments** that you do in real-time with attendees. Use everyday items so everyone can join in and share their findings through polls etc.
- **Hybrid online activities** such as sending attendees postal packs that include a craft kit. You can then do the craft activity together in a small and interactive online workshop.

Don't throw out the rulebook

When doing public engagement online, it is important to ask yourself many of the same questions you would ask if organising an in-person activity so that you achieve the same high quality. For example:

- **Who is my target audience and what will appeal to them?** Be specific in who you want to engage with and think about how they use technology. Perhaps engage with pre-existing online groups, forums etc.
- **How can my activity be informative whilst creative and interesting?** Attendees have increasingly high expectations for online activities and have the power to turn off the computer if they're not entertained!
- **What is my budget and what are my key costs?** Don't assume that online equals cheaper – online performances require actors and props, and hybrid activities could include sending out accompanying postal packs.

For more information on topics such as target audiences and budgets, check out our [toolkits](#) on these subjects.



Two-way engagement

The rich variety of online tools and platforms that exist mean there are many ways in which you can interact with attendees. It is essential that online engagement remains two-way and meaningful, so researcher and attendee both have a chance to share and learn.

If it's a small gathering, this can simply mean creating a comfortable environment where everyone turns on their microphones and chats. For larger groups, think about polls, chat functions, word clouds, games, voting and more!

Put interactivity at the centre of your planning and consider that people like to contribute in different ways so give attendees options.

Top tips:

Here are some things to consider when planning an online event:

- **Think about accessibility** and the barriers to participation that being online creates.
- **Ask community partners** for advice on platforms your intended audience already use.
- **Consider online security and safeguarding.** Talk with your IT support and colleagues to put measures in place.
- **Expect high drop-off rates** (up to 50% for online) and overbook activities to account for this.
- **Explain how to access your virtual platform.** Don't assume everyone will be familiar with the tech you are using, make joining in easy.
- **Let people know what to expect** as some may be unfamiliar with online activities.
- **Think about what you can manage** as hosting online activities can be time-consuming and involves learning new skills.
- **Try and capture the event.** Get creative as photos of screens won't do it justice and remember to get attendees' permission.



Accessibility and inclusivity

Accessibility and inclusivity are just as central to online engagement as they are to organising a physical activity. At every stage consider how you can make your activity user-friendly and welcoming to all. Ask yourself questions like – 'What barriers to participation does my particular online platform create?', 'What accessibility requirements should I pre-empt (e.g., speech to text captioning)?', 'How can I make online feel like a safe space for attendees?'

It is also important to acknowledge that across the UK there is very unequal access to digital infrastructure, and we need to think carefully about how to make an activity accessible for its target audience. For some audiences, online will not be the right option and other approaches should be explored.

Online activity checklist



The below checklist is a starting point to help you with practical considerations when setting up an online activity. Do add to this and include any tasks specific to your activity and the platform you are using.

SET UP

- Pick an appropriate and accessible platform, e.g. do not need an account to join. ☐
- Find ways for attendees to interact, e.g. chat box, break out rooms, polls, etc. ☐
- Check your platform's capacity limit for attendees and plan accordingly. ☐
- Follow the recommended security settings for the platform you are using. ☐
- If your platform allows, set up a virtual waiting room so attendees can join early. ☐
- Learn how to mute attendees upon entry to prevent background noise. ☐
- To avoid trolls, don't publish joining details online. Email directly to attendees. ☐
- Make it 'feel' like an event. Think about lighting, acoustics, a themed background, etc. ☐
- Check and follow safeguarding and data protection policies. ☐

TEAM WORK

- See if your partner can host the activity on their website and/or help to promote it. ☐
- Ahead of time, check contributors are comfortable with the platform and necessary tech. ☐
- If you are speaking at the activity, ask someone else to run the tech and monitor the chat box. ☐
- Set up a channel of communication to stay in touch behind the scenes. ☐
- Have a test run and practice with the tech. Get feedback from mock attendees. ☐
- Have a plan in place in case your activity is disturbed by trolls or technical difficulties. ☐
- Ask contributors to arrive early and have a quick run through in a virtual green room. ☐

ATTENDEES

- Give clear joining instructions as attendees may not have used the platform before. ☐
- Let attendees know what to expect, e.g. have camera on or off. ☐
- Check attendees' accessibility requirements, e.g. speech to text captioning. ☐
- Send a reminder email the day before so it's at the top of attendees' inboxes. ☐
- Think about how you will circulate your evaluation forms online after the activity. ☐