

# Advice for Disabled people on the use of digital communication technologies with social workers

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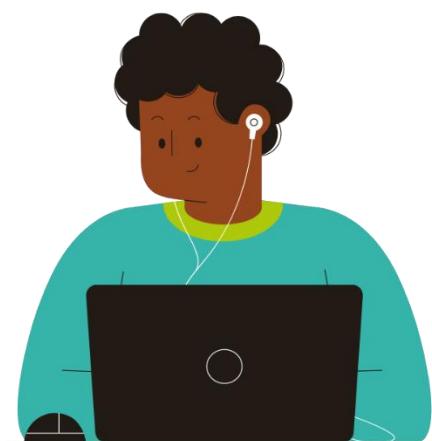


# Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person meetings with social workers have decreased as a matter of necessity. This has led to an increase in the use of digital communication technologies. We expect these changes will outlast the pandemic and will remain a common feature of interactions between Disabled service users and social workers.

This guide aims to give Disabled people advice and information on using such digital communication technologies to access social work services. It exists to empower users to get their needs met whilst using these ever-changing and, for some, unfamiliar technologies.

## What are digital communication technologies?



By 'digital communication technologies', we mean technologies that allow:

- two-way communication in real time. For example, Zoom or Microsoft Teams meetings, phone calls or WhatsApp video calls
- and communication in sequence such as text messages or WhatsApp messages or emails.

This guide was co-produced by Disabled service users, social workers, Disabled researchers, social work educators and academics. It is based on research interviews, and workshops



with Disabled service users and social workers. The research was carried out by a team of Disabled lay researchers. We have also co-produced guidance for social workers. This and other findings can be found on the Shaping Our Lives website - <https://shapingourlives.org.uk/report/digital-communication-technology-in-social-work/>.

We use the term “Disabled people” (with a capital D) throughout this document because the social model of Disability has informed all aspects of our work. Developed by Disabled people, the social model states that it is society that “disables” people. Society does this by imposing barriers that prevent us from fully participating. The social model also argues that it should not be Disabled people’s responsibility to remove these barriers. When we refer to Disabled people, this includes (but is not limited to):

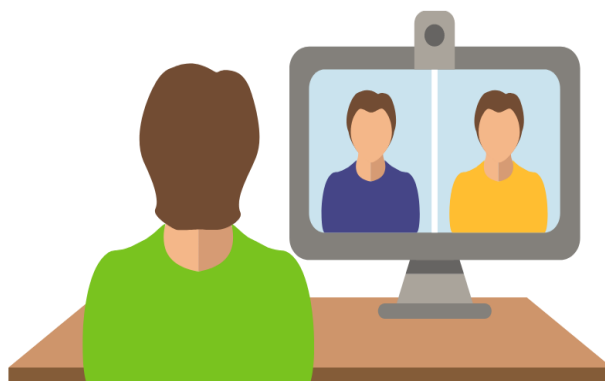
- d/Deaf individuals. The term d/Deaf refers to all those identifying as culturally Deaf (with a capital D), deaf and any level of hearing loss or hearing impairment.
- People with long-term conditions.
- People with “invisible” conditions.
- Neurodivergent people.
- People with mental health conditions.

While much of the guidance we provide applies to all social work interactions, most of it is most relevant to routine appointments, rather than times of crisis. Although the advice here is intended to be flexible, at these times it may be necessary to seek more specialist, one-to-one advice. You will find a list of places you might want to approach for support on **page 23** and further information and resources on **page 31**.

All names used in this guide are pseudonyms.



## General Tips



"When I was asked to use it the first time I struggled. I really struggled to understand it and I was panicking because I'm a face-to-face person. But as time has gone, it's helped me to understand that actually it's not a bad thing." (Ahmed)

"I'd never used Teams before. I'd never even heard of Zoom. But you know I've really got into it. Never thought I'd be a techie." (Salome)

Many Disabled people have found using digital communication technology for social work interactions to be easier than they first thought it would be. Everyone is still getting used to using these technologies for social work – including social workers. Try not to dismiss any communication methods before you have tried them. Instead, give it a go if it might be helpful for you. However, do not worry if something still does not work for you. There are other options, and you can request to use an alternative method.

### **Prepare for meetings, if possible**

Social work appointments, particularly assessments can be stressful. Not all interactions with social workers are scheduled. Sometimes you might have to talk to a social worker during an emergency or crisis situation. But where possible, prepare yourself before appointments to reduce any stress or potential emotional difficulties.



Below are some tips to help you prepare:

- Try to make sure that you are rested before your appointment, and that the space you are using is comfortable and private.
- Make notes for yourself before your appointment if you have the time. This can include what you need to remember to talk about or any questions you might want to ask.
- Consider whether you need any information in advance and let your social worker know. This could include who will be attending, what time the meeting will take place, its duration, or what will be discussed.
- For online/virtual appointments, such as video conferencing calls on Zoom or Microsoft Teams, it may help if you log on earlier than your planned appointment. This will give you a chance to get comfortable, reduce stress and be prepared to deal with any technical difficulties.
- For online/virtual appointments or meetings, make sure you have the host's contact number or email address in case you experience any technological issues.
- After your appointment, try to give yourself time to recover. Plan to do something you enjoy or simply relax.
- In particularly difficult situations, it can be useful to conduct your appointments in a room which you do not usually use to relax if you have this option. This might help you to create some distance once the appointment is over.
- If your social worker does not offer you notice of routine appointments, you may want to try to speak to them about it. You could ask them to book phone calls in with you or give them an idea of your schedule. If you do not feel comfortable speaking about this with your social worker (or have and see no improvement) you might want to consider either making a complaint or requesting the help of an advocate. You can find more information about this on **page 18**.
- Try to give as much notice as possible to your social worker for any reasonable adjustments you need. For more information on reasonable adjustments and how to request them, go to **page 10**.



- Consider whether you may need any support from a family member, friend, or advocate to take part. For more information about support, go to **page 23**.

## Privacy

- If you would prefer not to be seen during appointments which use video conferencing technology like Zoom or Teams, you can turn your camera off. It can be helpful for communication purposes to keep this on, but it is your choice.
- Most video conferencing technology will let you blur your background. You can turn this setting on if you do not want your surroundings to be seen during a call.
- If possible, try to conduct meetings such as phone or video calls in a private space where you cannot be overheard by others.
- If your social worker calls you when you are not in a private space, you can tell them that you are unable to talk due to a lack of privacy and ask to arrange a time for them to call you back.

## Your data



- If you have any concerns about how companies use your data, ask your social worker for more information or if you can use an alternative form of communication.
- Under the UK GDPR and Data Protection Act, all organisations and companies are responsible for securely handling and storing your information and personal data. If

you want information about how they handle your data, you can check your local authority's or the digital communication companies' Privacy Notice.

- You have a right to access and receive a copy of the personal data and other information that is held on you. This is commonly called a "subject access request". You can submit one to your local authority or any organisation and comply if you want to see the information your local authority holds on you.
- If you want more information about your data and rights or if you have any concerns about how your data is handled, you should contact and report your concerns to the Information Commissioners Office - <https://ico.org.uk/>.

## Keep communications professional



- Communicate professionally with your social worker or social work team.
- Use clear and understandable language that is accessible and comfortable to you.
- Try not to use abbreviations in written communications such as in text messages and emails.
- Before using an emoji, think about whether it is appropriate to the situation. Emojis can help communicate your emotions. However, too many emojis can be unprofessional and unclear. They may also be inaccessible to people using a screen reader.

"Don't panic, it's not rocket-science. Everybody has those early difficult moments. Don't be frightened to try it and fail and try and learn." (Ahmed)



# Your Choice(s) and Rights



This section gives you information to make sure your choices and rights are upheld when communicating with social workers using digital communication technologies. This is important in a context when social workers may have limited availability or may contact you with short notice.

You will find guidance on the following topics:

- Your right to choose the way you communicate with your social worker – whether that’s using digital technologies or meeting in-person.
- Reasonable adjustments.
- Recording meetings.
- How to appeal or get support from an advocate if your access needs are not met.

We have included a list of services that might be able to offer you more support, like advocacy and legal advice, on **page 31**.

## Your preferences and choice

“Don’t feel that you have to take what you’re offered because it’s the thing that has been offered [...] if you say this isn’t working for me, then people will come with an alternative that they might not have offered otherwise.” (Holly)



You can always state what your preferences are over any form of communication, and you do not have to take what you are given. However, there may be something that would enable you to access social work services on an **equal basis** with other service users. Then, that will likely count as a reasonable adjustment which you are legally entitled to.

## Reasonable adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, various groups of people are protected to prevent discrimination, harassment, and victimisation. Disability is one of nine protected characteristics under the act. Other protected characteristics such as race or gender may intersect with disability in your experience of social work services.

The Equality Act 2010 describes disability as:  
“A physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities”.

Long-term is defined as expected to last 12 months or longer. Under the Equality Act, all service providers must ensure that Disabled people can access their service(s) and that “**reasonable adjustments**” must be made in advance to allow this.

### What is a “reasonable adjustment”?

Reasonable adjustments are changes to the way services are provided to ensure that Disabled individuals are not placed at a disadvantage when accessing services.

Reasonable adjustments are assessed on a case-by-case basis. What might be a reasonable adjustment for one person might not work for another. It is about **proportionality**. This means that it is about taking the best and most reasonable steps to put someone on a level playing field.

For example, someone may need appointments to take place in the morning due to medication side effects that affect them in



the afternoon. But someone else might be more affected in the mornings by their medication or fatigue.



There is no set definition of what constitutes a reasonable adjustment under the Equality Act. Reasonable adjustments may be covered in your local authority's reasonable adjustment policy if it has one. Some local authorities or social care services might also include this information in their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) policy.

When local authorities provide reasonable adjustments, they are likely to consider whether the adjustment made would effectively overcome the barriers that a Disabled person faces in accessing their service. They will also likely consider how practical or affordable it is for them to make the adjustment, although most adjustments will typically be low or no cost.

Examples of reasonable adjustments may include:

- Documents and information available and sent in alternative formats such as Easy Read, large print, or Braille.
- Providing British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters or captioners.
- Recording the meeting, which may be particularly helpful for those who find recalling information or taking notes difficult.
- Providing information in advance of the meeting, which can be particularly helpful for those with anxiety.

- Allowing someone to bring an advocate or support worker to meetings.
- Meeting in person, which can be particularly helpful for individuals who may find digital communication difficult.

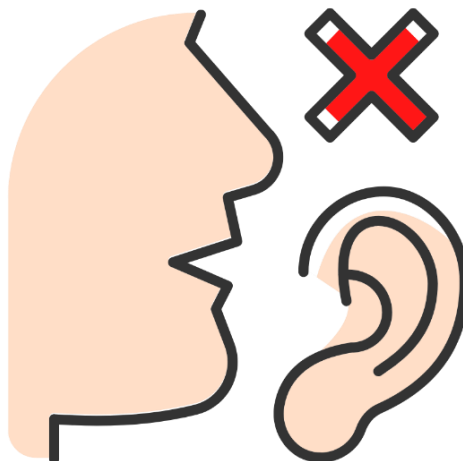
### How to make a reasonable adjustment request?

Generally, there are no set rules on how to make a reasonable adjustment request. You should be able to do this:

- In **writing** via letter or email.
- **Verbally** over the phone, in-person.
- Via an advocate, support worker or interpreter.

As a Disabled person making a reasonable adjustment request, you may want to consider these tips:

1. Start by thinking about what **barriers** are preventing you from accessing the service, opportunity or activity. These could include:
  - a. **Physical barriers:** These are barriers linked to our physical environment which prevent access. This could include a lack of level access to buildings, inaccessible toilets, or issues with specific lighting.
  - b. **Information or communication barriers:** This can include barriers imposed by a lack of alternative formats such as digital documentation, Easy Read, or Braille.



c. **Attitudinal barriers:** These are assumptions and attitudes about Disabled people that justify, explain, or perpetuate discrimination and exclusion in society. For example, some people with learning disabilities have encountered negative assumptions about their ability to manage their finances when they simply need some help from a support worker to do this.

2. Make a reasonable adjustment request and try to clearly state what your access needs are. Access needs are arrangements or equipment that may need to be put in place for you.

It is not always necessary to provide your medical information or conditions when you make a reasonable adjustment request. It is also best practice to give as much notice as possible to your social worker for any reasonable adjustments you need. This is because some reasonable adjustments will need to be arranged in advance, like captioners or British Sign Language interpreters.

## Examples of reasonable adjustment requests

### Example 1

Good morning my name is Andrew Smith.  
I have an appointment next week with my social worker Brenda Jones on Wednesday, 12 January 2022 at 2 PM. I'm a wheelchair user and would like to make sure blue badge parking and level access is available for my meeting.  
Many thanks,  
Andrew

### Example 2

Hi,  
My name is Abdul Khan, I have a Microsoft Teams appointment with my social worker Tom McDonald on Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> February at 4.30 PM. I will need captioners at the meeting. If it is not possible to arrange these for the meeting, we will need to reschedule it.



If your reasonable adjustment request is not implemented, your local authority must have a complaints procedure in place that you can follow. How to complain is covered in more detail on **page 15**.

## Choice and in-person meeting



“Ask for the first meeting to be in-person if you’re most comfortable with that.”

“I am able to be seen and heard better (myself and my body) by the social workers team. I feel re-assured not to be mis-read or mis-interpreted in what I am saying or describing.” (Lorenzo, service user)

“The advantages of meeting people is that you get to, you know, they can read your tone of voice, they can see your body language, they can see the impression, they can see the environment.” (Ahmed)

We know that for many Disabled people meeting in-person may be the most accessible form of communication. When working out whether to request an in-person meeting over one via digital communication technology, you may want to think about:

- Is an in-person meeting essential as an access need for you to be able to communicate with your social worker? If so, make a reasonable adjustment request. Information on how to make a request can be found on **page 10**.



- Where the in-person meeting would take place and how this might impact you. If it is at a location outside your home, is this location accessible to you? Are there appropriate parking facilities, toilet facilities or do you have any other access requirements that you may need to tell your social worker about so you can participate?
- The COVID-19 infection risk and how this will be managed. We would recommend that you check the latest government guidance before you attend your appointment.

## **What to do if your access needs are not being met (by social workers or by sub-contractors such as Direct Payments organisations)**

If you feel that your access needs are not being met – for example, your local authority has not given you a copy of your assessment in the format you need, or your personal assistant is not fully trained in the tasks you need help with – there are various organisations who can support you to solve the problem. In this subsection we will first cover what the complaints process looks like when dealing with different organisations.



### **Problems with your local authority**

- If you are experiencing an issue with a particular social worker, it might be worth speaking to them first to see what can be done. If you do not feel comfortable doing this, or you have tried and it has not helped, consider speaking to



someone who works above your social worker like a manager. It is likely they can either speak with the social worker to help make things right or allocate you a new social worker instead.

- If that fails, or you feel that your local authority has acted unfairly or unreasonably, your first step is to follow your local authority's specific complaints procedure. Your local authority must have a specific complaints procedure in place. Most local authorities will also have a specific team that works on complaints. You can usually find information on their website, or by calling or writing to them.
- If you are still unhappy with the decision after following your local authority's complaints procedure, or your local authority has taken an unreasonable amount of time to respond to your complaint (usually this is defined as over 12 weeks), you can appeal to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSO). They can only investigate your case if:
  - You have faced a 'personal injustice.' This means you must have been directly affected by the matter.
  - It has been no more than 12 months since the incident, or when you first became aware of the problem.

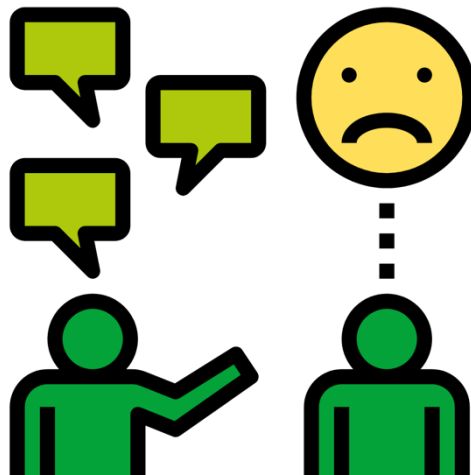
The LGSO will then investigate your case and decide how your local authority must make the issue right. This could include asking your local authority to formally apologise to you, reconsider a decision, or make a payment to you.

### **Problems with sub-contractors such as direct payments organisations**

If you have a problem with a care provider or a subcontractor, consider approaching them to discuss the issue first. They may be able to offer a resolution that works for you. You might also be able to change the way your care is delivered. For example, you can request a new support worker or change your payroll provider.







We know that sometimes making a complaint is the only way things can be set right. Depending on how your social care is funded and arranged, there are different ways to do this.

- **Your social care is arranged by your local authority – often called 'commissioned services':** You should be able to complain through your local authority's complaints procedure. If you do this and are unhappy with the outcome, or you have waited over 12 weeks without a response, go to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman (LGSO). The LGSO will independently investigate your case and try to make things right.
- **You receive services funded and arranged by the NHS like Continuing Care:** You can either complain to the care provider or your local Clinical Commissioning Group (CCG) or Integrated Care System (ICS). If you choose to complain to the provider, you cannot then submit a complaint to your CCG or ICS. If you need to pursue the complaint further, you will need to approach the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman works in a very similar way to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.
- **You are experiencing problems with a service paid for by a direct payment:** You cannot use your local authority's complaint procedure to resolve this. Instead, you will need to complain to the care provider using their complaints procedure. By law, all health and social care services must have a procedure in place. If you followed this procedure and

the problem persists, or you want to challenge the outcome of the complaint, speak with the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

We know that making a complaint can be intimidating and upsetting for many Disabled people. In the next subsection we will cover advocacy. Advocates are professionals who can support you through the complaints process, so you do not have to go through it alone.

## Right to an advocate

If you need extra support to complain or feel that your rights are not being upheld, you might want to consider requesting the help of an advocate. An advocate is a professional who works and argues in support of another's cause. They can offer extra support to help you have your voice heard. Their services are usually free of charge, so you do not have to pay anything.



Advocacy will usually fall under one of two main categories:

1. Independent advocacy: Independent advocates are separate from your council and can help you with a range of issues, like housing, transport, or social care. If you feel you have been treated unfairly, an independent advocate can support you to make a complaint to or about your local council. They can also help you to access information and services that might be useful to you.

Anyone can request the help of an independent advocate. You can either ask your council to refer you to one or you can self-refer. At the end of this section, you will find further information on how to identify your local service.

2. The other type of advocate you may be entitled to is often called a **specialist advocate**. Depending on your situation, you may have a legal right to an advocate under the Care Act, the Mental Capacity Act, or the Mental Health Act. Staff responsible for your care – so in most cases, your council, or your local NHS trust if you are in an inpatient or in receipt of Continuing Care – have a duty to refer you to specialist advocacy services if you meet the criteria. You cannot self-refer.

Below is a brief overview of these three types of specialist advocacy and when you may be entitled to it.

### **A. Care Act advocacy**

Care Act advocates support people to understand their rights under the Care Act. Your local council typically has a duty to refer you to a Care Act advocate if:

- You would find it 'substantially difficult' to be involved in your needs assessment, a review, or any part of the care and support plan journey. For example, if you have trouble understanding or retaining information, or it is hard for you to communicate your views and wishes.
- And, you do not otherwise have an 'appropriate person' to support you. An appropriate person does not have to be a professional. It can be a family member, partner, or a friend. It cannot be someone who provides paid or professional care for you. The appropriate person also needs to be someone who you both want to take on the role, and someone who can support your active involvement in the process.

If the above applies to you and your council does not refer you to a Care Act advocate for support, any decision made by your council will be considered invalid once challenged.





## **B. Mental Capacity Act Advocacy**

### **Independent Mental Health Capacity advocates (IMCAs)**

support people who lack the capacity to make specific and important decisions about their care. IMCAs are often also used for care reviews. They must be involved for decisions that may involve depriving someone of their liberty such as detention/sectioning under the Mental Health Act.

### **What is capacity?**

Capacity means you can make your own decision and understand what that decision means. Someone lacking capacity is unable to understand and retain information or communicate their decision. Needing information or communication in another format or setting – for example, visual sign language, Easy Read, or in-person rather than through Teams – does not mean a person lacks capacity. Like Care Act advocates, IMCAs are only used when there is no one independent of services, such as a family member or friend, who can be talked to about your care. IMCAs help support people to make decisions and, where possible, to speak for themselves.

## **C. Mental Health Act advocacy**

You might be entitled to an Independent Mental Health advocate (IMHAs) if you are either:

- Being detained under the Mental Health Act.
- Under a Community Treatment Order (CTO).



- Considering neurosurgery or electroconvulsive treatment and deemed to be vulnerable.
- You have been conditionally discharged and restricted.
- Subject to guardianship – for example, where another person is taking care of you and can make decisions on your behalf, to protect your welfare or the welfare of others.

Mental health staff have a duty to inform you if you are eligible to receive support from an IMHA. An IMHA can help you to understand and exercise your rights under the Mental Health Act, as well as explain any conditions or restrictions you are subject to and why.

Advocacy services are usually offered by **your local Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) or a disability charity**. At the end of this section, we have included a list of places you can approach to find your local DPO or legal advice.

## Recording meetings



You may wish to audio or video record your online or in-person meeting with your social workers. Your social worker may also request to record your meeting. This subsection gives you information of your rights and best practice on recording.

### If you want to record a meeting

- It is good practice to contact your social worker in advance to notify them that you need to record the meeting.
- You do not have to give a reason for recording. It might be useful to let them know why as some might initially feel defensive when asked to be recorded.

- There might be locations (some hospital spaces, for example) where filming and photography are restricted.
- Make sure that whatever device you are using to record the meeting is charged and working correctly.

### **If your social worker wants to record a meeting**

- If you do not feel comfortable being recorded, let your social worker know.
- You can ask for more information about the purpose of the recording, how it will be used and stored.
- All local authorities will have a GDPR data protection policy explaining how your personal data is securely handled and stored. For more information about data protection go to **page 7**.
- Many local authorities will also have a policy or procedure explaining the process they follow to conduct and process recordings. Ask to see these policies if you feel unsure.

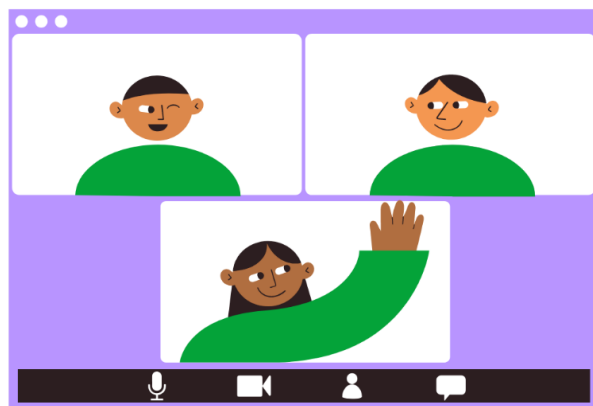
Throughout this section, there are points where we have suggested that you seek out specialist, and potentially legal, advice. Places you might want to start searching for this support can be found at the end of this document on **page 31**.



# Advice, Training and Support on Digital Communication Technologies

This section aims to give you information on the support available to help you with digital communication technologies and how to find and access it.

## There is support available if you need it



There is a lot of advice and support out there, but we know it is not always that easy to find or access. The types of support available to you can include:

- Access to equipment.
- Support in learning to use digital communication technologies.
- Funding for support.
- Resources to improve your digital skills.

The support available is likely to depend on your circumstances and where you live, but below are some suggestions:

- **Local libraries and colleges:** Many local libraries and colleges offer residents support to use digital technologies, including training on software and internet safety.
- **Social prescribing link workers:** Social prescribing involves helping people to improve their health, wellbeing and social welfare by connecting them to community



services. Your local social prescribing team should have knowledge on what is available for you locally. To access their support, you can ask your GP surgery or another healthcare professional to connect you.

- **D/deaf and Disabled-led organisations (DDPOs):** DDPOs may be able to provide equipment as well as support and advice. As a starting point, Shaping Our Lives has a list of user-led organisations available on their website: <https://shapingourlives.org.uk/user-led-organisations/>
- **Charities and other not-for-profit organisations:** Charities representing your impairment(s) often provide useful information and support. They might even be able to suggest assistive technologies tailored to your impairment. For example, the Royal National Institute of the Blind (RNIB) provide training in the use of different digital communication technologies. RNIB also offer financial support for blind and visually impaired people to access technology, with grants of up to £500 available.
- **Technology manufacturers:** Companies who produce digital communication technologies often have training and helpful resources on how to use their technology and any assistive features.





- **Recovery colleges:** These are services that provide educational resources to people recovering from mental health difficulties. The support available often will include computing courses for beginners.
- **Be My Eyes:** A free app connecting blind/visually impaired people to sighted volunteers offering support via a live video call.
- **AbilityNet:** Organisation supporting Disabled people to use technology to achieve their goals at home, at work and in education. More information on their website: <https://abilitynet.org.uk/>.

If you have technology available to you, it is likely that you can also use this for social work purposes. But if your current technology is unsuitable or outdated, you may be able to get financial help to cover the costs.



Here are some suggestions for schemes and tools that might be able to help:

- **Disabled Students Allowance (DSA):** DSA is support that is available to Disabled university students. You could be offered assistive technology and training on how to use it. Your university may also be able to provide further training or funding to help you.

- **Turn2Us:** Turn2Us is a national charity that provides practical help to people in financial need. The website has a great grant searching tool, so you can look for charities that offer funding for technology: <https://www.turn2us.org.uk/>. You can also call the Turn2Us helpline on 0808 802 2000 for support.
- **Disability Grants:** This website has lots of information on grants, with some available for technology: <https://www.disability-grants.org/>.
- **Your local authority:** Many local authorities run a local welfare scheme to help fund necessary items if you are on a low-income. You can ask your social worker if it is available in your area.
- **Grants for Carers:** Carers may be able to access grants and discounts to pay for equipment that is necessary for their care responsibilities. The Carers Trust have put together a list online of places your carer can approach for help which can be found on their website: <https://carers.org/grants-and-discounts/introduction>.
- **Access to Work:** If you are in work, you may be able to apply to Access to Work for funding for technology and training. Further information about Access to Work is available on the GOV.UK website: <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>.
- **Disability Related Expenditure (DRE):** If you pay for your social care, you may be able to deduct costs like internet fees and technology as DRE from your financial assessment. Although some of the guidance is specific to the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, Real DPO have produced helpful pdf factsheets on what counts as DRE: <https://www.real.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Reals-guidance-on-disability-related-expenditure-updated-11.12.17.pdf>.



Your social worker may be able to guide you towards other support, so do not be afraid to ask them for help. You might also find it useful to have someone with you at appointments. This is also true for appointments taking place using digital communication technologies – this can be a friend, a family member, support worker or even an advocate.



## Social Workers' Work Situation

Most social workers genuinely want to help and are doing their best in difficult circumstances, especially in the context of budget cuts to social care. Social workers may also be supporting lots of people at once. As a result, it may seem that individual preferences and/or needs are being overlooked or lead to difficulties or delays in contacting them.

In-person meetings and home visits have long been considered the mainstay of social work practice. While it is true that they may give a more holistic view of someone's circumstances, these types of appointments have been dramatically reduced due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Guidelines around in-person meetings are often uncertain and changing rapidly.

In this context, social workers are balancing their own needs with those of their clients. In addition, their use of digital communications technologies is influenced by rules and restrictions imposed by local authorities. This section aims to give you tips and advice to understand and best navigate these circumstances, so you can get your needs met.



## Restrictions on the use of digital communication technologies

- Many local authorities have policies on the type of digital communication technology that social workers can use. For instance, some local authorities block WhatsApp from social workers phones. It is also common for online/virtual meetings to only be offered via Microsoft Teams as it is considered more secure.
- But some social workers can use Zoom if this is better for you, so do ask.
- If you have specific access requirements or use assistive technology that does not work with the digital communication technology offered, please go to **page 10** for more information on reasonable adjustments or complaints.

## Social workers' use and access to digital communication technologies

Most social workers have a mobile phone number. If accessible to you, phone calls are often the easiest way to contact them, especially at times of crisis. If you are not getting a response, it is useful to remember that your social worker may be dealing with other tasks, be in a meeting, or on leave. In this situation, there should be a general number you can use to contact your local social work services.

While social workers generally want to help people to access and learn to use digital communications technologies, it is not always possible. Social workers may not be confident using the technologies themselves or unfamiliar with assistive technologies. For more information on support, go to **page 23**.

## Privacy

"I could see that she was in a room on her own, but I didn't know how thin the walls were or if someone else could hear" (Holly, service user).





A common concern when using digital communications technology is privacy. Due to the pandemic and a lack of office space caused by government funding cuts, your social worker may be working from home, in an open plan office or may be on the go.

If you are concerned about the privacy of your conversations, do raise this. It may be possible to find a way to work around this such as using headphones or not mentioning personally identifying information in a location where they could be overheard.

## **Authentication systems**

Many local authorities tell social workers to use authentication systems such as “Egress” when sending personal information such as care plans by email. This is to help make sure no one else can open them. These can be tricky to deal with. If you have problems using these authentication systems and would rather not use them, tell your social workers, and if necessary, their manager. They may be able to make a note on your file that you understand that they give added security but that you do not want to use them.

## Further information and resources

This guide aimed to give you advice and information on using digital technologies, empower you to get your needs met and deal with any potential issues you are facing. You might now want to seek more information on any of the topics covered. There are also points where we have suggested that you seek out specialist, and potentially legal, advice. The section below lists additional resources, organisations and sources of support you might want to check. These are organised by themes and alphabetical order.

### General

- **Shaping Our Lives:** Shaping Our Lives have lots of helpful resources online. This includes guides on how to run accessible meetings, disability news updates, and more. They also have a list of user-led organisations which can offer you more support. You can use their website to search for a user-led organisation by region, user type or by alphabetical order: <https://shapingourlives.org.uk/user-led-organisations/>.

### Your data

- **Information Commissioners Office:** The Information Commissioners Office provides information about data, your rights, and how to complain if you have concerns about how your data is handled. Available at: <https://ico.org.uk/>.

## Your choice(s) and rights

### Reasonable adjustments

- **Citizens Advice – Duty to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people.** Information about the duty to make reasonable adjustments. Available at: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/law-and-courts/discrimination/what-are-the-different-types-of-discrimination/duty-to-make-reasonable-adjustments-for-disabled-people/>.



- **Mind – What are reasonable adjustments?** Information about reasonable adjustments. Available at: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/legal-rights/discrimination-in-everyday-life/reasonable-adjustments/>.
- **Social Work England – Equality and diversity: reasonable adjustments guidance.** Available at: <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/media/3500/equality-and-diversity-reasonable-adjustments-guidance.pdf>.

## How to complain

- **Citizens Advice – Where to start if you have a problem with adult social care:** This page gives information if things go wrong and where to start if you want to sort out a problem and how to complain. Available at: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/health/nhs-and-social-care-complaints/complaining-about-social-care-services/where-to-start-if-you-have-a-problem-with-adult-social-care/>.
- **Local Government & Social Care Ombudsman – How to complain.** Available at: <https://www.lgo.org.uk/how-to-complain>.

## Advocacy

- **Advocacy services** are usually provided by your local D/deaf and Disabled People's Organisation (DDPO) or a disability charity. You can either ask your local authority to connect you with them, have a look online, or you can check out Shaping Our Lives' list of user-led organisations on their website: <https://shapingourlives.org.uk/user-led-organisations/>.
- For issues with employment, **ACAS** (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) gives employees and employers free, impartial advice on workplace rights, rules, and best practice. You can either call their helpline on 0300 123 1100 or visit their website: <https://www.acas.org.uk/>.





- **Care Act 2014 – Independent Advocacy Support**  
Available at:  
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/section/67>.
- **Mind – Advocacy in mental health:** Information about advocacy and how it can help you. It gives information on the different types of advocacy, what sort of situations an advocate can help you with, and how to find an advocate. Available at: <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/advocacy/imhas-england/>.
- **SCIE – What do IMCAs do and who should get an IMCA?** Information about Independent Mental Capacity Advocates. Available at:  
<https://www.scie.org.uk/mca/imca/do>.
- **SCIE – Understanding Independent Mental Health Advocacy (IMHA) for mental health staff:** Information about the role of IMHA, who is eligible and how mental health services staff can support people to access IMHA support. Available at: <https://www.scie.org.uk/independent-mental-health-advocacy/resources-for-staff/understanding/>.
- **Rethink Mental Illness – Advocacy:** Information about what advocates do, how they can help you and how you can find one near you. Available at:  
<https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/rights-restrictions/rights-and-restrictions/advocacy/>.
- **Voice Ability – Care Act advocacy:** Information about Care advocates and the support they provide. Available at:  
<https://www.voiceability.org/about-advocacy/types-of-advocacy/care-act-advocacy>.

## Advice

- You may also have other advice services locally than can provide support. **Advice Services Alliance** has an online database of advice services that have been awarded their



Advice Quality Standard: <https://asauk.org.uk/advice-quality-standard/find-aqs-centres/>.

- **CASCAIDr** (the Centre for Adults' Social Care – Advice, Information and Dispute Resolution) is a specialist advice charity that helps people access their full legal rights to care and support services, including NHS services. You can self-refer or book a call through their website: <https://www.cascaidr.org.uk/>.
- **The Disability Law Service** provides free legal help and advice to Disabled people in the areas of community care, employment, welfare benefits and discrimination. They also have online advice, factsheets, and templates. You can either call them on 020 7791 9800 or visit their website: <https://dls.org.uk/>.
- **Citizens Advice** have many centres nationwide that provide support on issues like benefits, work, housing, health and more. You can contact their national helpline on 0800 144 8848 (0800 702 2020 if you live in Wales, and 0800 144 8884 through Relay UK) or find out more online: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>.
- Search for a local solicitor using **The Law Society's** online database. You can refine your search on a few access options, such as accepts legal aid, disabled access to building, provides British Sign Language services, and more: <https://solicitors.lawsociety.org.uk/>.
- **Trade Unions** may also be able to support you with employment issues or signpost you to an alternative service. Some Trade Unions are specific to certain professionals or locations, so it is best to search online or speak with your workplace representative if you have one.

## Legislation

- **Mental Capacity Act 2005 – Best interests:** <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2005/9/section/4>.



- **Mind – Discrimination in everyday life:** Information about what you can do if you have been discriminated against and where you can get support and advice.  
<https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/2923/discrimination-in-everyday-life-2018.pdf>.
- **Rethink Mental Illness – The Mental Health Act 1983:** Information about detention under the Mental Health Act 1983. It explains why someone might be detained and what rights they have. Available at:  
<https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/rights-restrictions/mental-health-laws/mental-health-act-1983/>.
- **SCIE – Mental Capacity Act (MCA):** Information about the Mental Capacity Act 2005. Available at:  
<https://www.scie.org.uk/mca/introduction>.
- **SCIE – How is deprivation of liberty authorised under DoLS:** Information about the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguard (DoLS). Available at:  
<https://www.scie.org.uk/mca/dols/at-a-glance#authorised>.

## Recording meetings

- **Example of a Council's procedure on the electronic recording of meetings:** Lancashire County Council – Electronic Recording of Meetings. Available at:  
[https://www.proceduresonline.com/lancashirecsc/p\\_electronic\\_rec.html](https://www.proceduresonline.com/lancashirecsc/p_electronic_rec.html).
- **Best practice guide for video conferencing:** Principal Children and Families Social Worker Network and Social Work England – Best Practice Guide for Video Call/Contact and Virtual/Online Home visit. Available at:  
<https://esafeguarding.org/publications/PSW-and-SWE-Best-Practice-Guide-for-Video-Call-and-Virtual-Home-Visit-20200505.pdf>.



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The full formal name of the research study was:  
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Further copies of this document in a variety of formats, along with other study outputs (including a practice guide for social workers) are available at:

<https://shapingourlives.org.uk/report/digital-communication-technology-in-social-work/>.

If you would like to give us feedback on this document, please email [hello@shapingourlives.org.uk](mailto:hello@shapingourlives.org.uk).

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# Shaping Our Lives

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