

Social Work, Disabled Service Users and Digital Communication Technology: A Practice Guide



Introduction

This Practice Guide comes from research undertaken by Disabled lay researchers, supported by Shaping Our Lives and academics at King's College London in partnership with BASW. Genuine co-production is still unusual: often talked about but, in the real world, much harder to deliver. However, in the case of this research, genuine co-production has run throughout the project from beginning to end.

Shaping Our Lives, the service user led organisation, together with King's College London and BASW bid for the funding for this research in 2021. We proposed that the 'normal' research arrangements were reversed. Rather than university researchers or social workers interviewing Disabled people and then writing up the findings, in *this* research Disabled people interviewed social workers and Disabled social work service users and then *they* wrote up the findings. Then, instead of university researchers or social workers making recommendations, the findings were shared simultaneously with both Disabled service users and social workers, who attended two workshops together, to decide how best to interpret the findings and make recommendations.

Both social workers and Disabled service users often recognised similar problems and similar opportunities, which produced both individual and collective 'Aha!' moments. Sometimes, the perceptions of social workers and Disabled service users differed, and these differences produced a rich source of discussion and mutual understanding.

The prompt for the content of this research was the major shift to digital communication (for example, Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp etc.) between social workers and Disabled service users brought about by Covid-19. Social work is, of course, about relationship-based practice, but increasingly these relationships are undertaken through digital communication technologies.

From the start all three organisational partners were committed to producing a range of outputs from the research which would make a real difference. This is reflected in the very specific recommendations for social work practice in Part I. Part II sets out the pros and cons of different digital communication technologies, while Part III provides a short conclusion. Part IV gives a short description of

how the research was undertaken. We have also produced advice for Disabled people on the use of digital communication technologies with social workers (details are inside the back cover).

We are grateful to the 6 Disabled lay researchers, to the 20 Disabled service users and 15 social workers who agreed to be interviewed, and to the 7 members of the Advisory Group who oversaw the process. Finally, we are grateful to the National Institute of Health Research School for Social Care Research (NIHR SSCR) who funded the work.

Note on terminology: Led by Shaping Our Lives, it was determined from the outset that the research project would use the terms 'Disabled people', 'Disabled lay researchers' and 'Disabled service users' (with a capital D) rather than other terminology. This is based on the social model of disability developed by Disabled people. It states that it is society that "disables" people by imposing barriers that prevent us from fully participating, and 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

All names used in this guide are pseudonyms.

PART I: RECOMMENDATIONS

Some methods of digital communication (texts, emails, mobile phones) have been an established part of social work for perhaps twenty years, but the impact of Covid-19 has accelerated the use of these and new forms of digital communication technology. The provision of smartphones to social workers by their employers has become increasingly common. And video-conferencing (for example, Teams, Zoom), virtually unknown before the start of the pandemic, have become part of everyday social work. This research explored the use of these digital communication technologies between social workers in Local Authority Adult Social Work Departments and Disabled service users and how they affected people's experiences. Interviews with Disabled service users and social workers were undertaken by Disabled lay researchers. There was a recognition by both social workers and Disabled service users that though there are some benefits, the use of digital communication technology can threaten core social work values.



1. The importance of choice in communication methods – and restrictions in the real world



This ought to be about individual solutions for individual people” (Judith, Disabled service user)

“I don’t want the Social Worker to view me as uncooperative. So I have to use the methods they prefer, instead of the ones which suit my health needs best.” (Fiona, Disabled service user)

“I wasn’t given a choice. It was either over the phone or a home visit. And I know since the pandemic we’ve got a few more options, Zoom, etc., but I was never given those options, even recently when I spoke to my social worker a few weeks ago, it was only the telephone option that was perhaps mentioned.” (Eric, Disabled service user)

“You were so desperate for the fact that somebody had got in contact with you that whatever they offered you, you were willing to take.” (Ahmed, Disabled service user)

Person-centred care is a core social work value. While there was often a rhetoric of choice around communication, this did not often play out in the real world. Both social workers and Disabled service users recognised this might be due to a range of factors: organisational understanding about assistive technologies¹, a view that social work always had to be done in-person, or organisational norms. Disabled service users reported very often that they are not offered a real choice of different digital communication methods (or none).

- Most employers had systems for recording a service user’s preference or needs in terms of communication. But social workers acknowledged that the communication ‘preferences’ box was not always consulted by

social workers, not always kept up-to-date, and Disabled service users told us that their stated preferences and needs were not always followed. **Check the file before making contact. Consult Disabled service users on a regular basis as to whether this is still the best form of communication.**

- **For new service users, social workers should ask what forms of communication works best for them** (for example, phone, email, video-conferencing). Disabled service users noted that the onus should not be on them to ask, and that choice should not be an ‘optional extra’. Often it is a requirement under disability law (‘reasonable adjustments’ are outlined in the Equality Act 2010) and international rights (Article 9 in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) that choice is offered to Disabled service users. **Proactively give Disabled service users a choice of all the options available to you.**
- In any conversation about choice of communication, **social workers should feel able to speak to Disabled service users about what forms of digital communication are not available to them as social workers.** For example, Disabled service users may prefer Zoom, but the Adult Social Work Department may only allow Teams. Not all social workers might have WhatsApp, or social work employers may not allow the use of WhatsApp.
- Many impairments may not be obvious or “visible”. Also, Disabled service users noted that just because individuals shared a disability it did not mean those people shared a communication preference. **Don’t make assumptions about what people’s disabilities or impairments are, or how that affects their communication preferences or needs.**
- It was reported by Disabled service users that organisations’ spam filters often filter out emails from outside the organisation. **Social workers should ensure that the email addresses of service users are added to their contacts list on their email programme so that email messages get past filters.**

¹ One blind service user reported that she was sent printed material in hard copy by the Adult Social Services Department. She pointed this out to her social worker who then went and scanned the documents and sent them by email. As the Disabled service user pointed out Optical Character Recognition software can’t read scanned text.

2. Inclusion and Exclusion



Zoom is not that great. But she doesn't use Zoom, it's called Microsoft Teams. It's horrible. Every time I have problems with setting up on there. She said it was part of her, what do they call it, company had to use [it]. With a learning disability it should be more easier to what we would like, but she said she couldn't do it." (Sally, Disabled service user)

- For some Disabled service users, the recent shift by employers for social workers to use a variety of digital communication technologies meant that barriers to inclusion were removed. But *specific* digital communication technologies could be challenging or impossible for people with different disabilities or impairments. For instance, Disabled service users, especially those who relied on screen readers found Zoom was easier to use than Microsoft Teams. But many employers did not allow the use of Zoom. (The pros and cons of different digital communication technologies are summarized in Part II). **Insistence by Adult Social Work Departments on the use of technologies that are inaccessible to Disabled service users is exclusionary.**
- Social workers and Disabled service users reported that not offering in-person meetings was thought to have impacted particularly badly on certain groups of people, namely: people whose problems then became hidden from view (such as hoarders, people who self-neglect, people in abusive relationships); people unable to have private conversations with social workers and who therefore don't disclose all of their problems; people with dementia or learning disabilities; those without access to equipment or unable to meet the costs of digital communication technologies; people who did not have English as a first language. **In-person meetings remain a vital part of the service offer for both social workers and Disabled service users and should not be phased out by video-conferencing and other forms of digital technology.**

3. Privacy and confidentiality



[Egress] requires you to use a particular app, and then you need a series of passwords to get into each of the documents. And I have problems because I can't always hit the right key on the keyboard. You can't cut and paste passwords either, they have to be physically typed in. Which makes it extremely difficult to use because you've got to be extra accurate on your typing, which is not easy at all for me because a) I have dyspraxia and b) I have neuropathy in both my hands. Why on earth they cannot do what other organisations do and send an attachment with an agreed previous password is beyond me." (Judith, Disabled service user)

"I can control my environment. I can't control where they are. And I think some [social workers] think that something's private when actually their level of private's not acceptable to me. So to me, if they were sat in an office, even if they're in an office with other social workers, that's not OK." (Salome, Disabled service user)

"People don't always like to discuss their needs or their finances in front of their sons or daughters, or even their spouse." (Jenny, social worker)

- Many Adult Social Work Departments require the use of authentication software such as Egress when sending emails, on the basis of data security. Such systems presented particular barriers to many Disabled service users, who described it as, for example, "a total pain" and "enough to drive anybody absolutely potty". Disabled service users thought it was used inappropriately to encrypt emails around routine admin tasks, for example, fixing times for meetings. Some social workers allowed Disabled service users to make an informed choice about whether they received documents via authentication systems or not. **Find out if you can allow Disabled service users to opt out of their emails using authentication software. If your**

employer insists on using Egress or something similar, do send service users accessible and up-to-date instructions with a link to Egress technical support. If they are still having difficulties and you cannot help, then do signpost or refer them to another organisation for further support.

- Both social workers and Disabled service users expressed some concern that phone calls and video conferences might result in a breach of privacy at either end. **Make sure you can't be overheard when speaking to a service user over the phone or video-conferencing, and reassure them that this is the case. Check that they are somewhere where they feel free to talk openly.**

4. Supporting Disabled service users' agency



“It's about empowerment. Let people decide what works best for them and then make the adaption, as opposed to what works best for the social worker” (Eric, Disabled service user)

“I think you have to be mindful of what you are using to communicate, and whether that is enabling the person to communicate as effectively as they can” (Stephen, social worker)

“I think sometimes we can get complacent, and we think oh well we'll just make this telephone call, we'll speak to the mum and dad – I'll hold my hands up – I've done it before – if you're in a rush you just think oh I'll just speak to mum and dad because I'll get the answer a bit quicker.” (Jane, social worker)

- Authentication systems such as Egress often forced Disabled service users to rely on someone else to help them open it, undermining a key social work value of promoting independence. Furthermore, Egress did not allow service users to download documents to keep in their own filing system, but only in the Egress app. This meant that service users had reduced control

over their paperwork. **Find out if you can allow Disabled service users to opt out of their emails using authentication software. Alternatively find out if non-confidential emails (for example, agreeing an appointment time) can be sent without encryption. If your employer requires the use of Egress or something similar for every email, make sure you send out clear instructions to service users on how to use it. Make sure that Disabled service users can also download documents to keep in their own filing system, as Egress may sever old email links after a period of inactivity.**

- Some Disabled service users lack equipment or software. Others need help to use digital communication technologies. Social workers acknowledged that it was tempting to ring a family member or carer instead. Using family members or carers can impact on both confidentiality and agency, which is why it's so important to offer a choice of communication methods that best suits the individual service user. **Avoid a reliance on family members around digital communication technologies. Advocates can be used to help communication.**

5. Improving training and skills



Training [in the use of digital communication technologies with service users] would be of benefit for everyone because you know we're just making it up as we go along.” (Jenny, social worker)

- **Social workers need to be aware of what support is available to Disabled service users around digital communication technology – whether it's access to equipment, or training, or tech support in how to use it.** There was widespread recognition by both social workers and Disabled service users that the services on offer vary widely between areas. Some Adult Social Work Departments had specialist teams – others did not. Some areas had voluntary sector organisations that provided digital technology support – others did not. There was also recognition that some support around digital communication technology required input from technological specialists, while other digital communication support

was low key and easy to deliver (for example, explaining that to open a PDF file, the PDF reader needs to be downloaded).

- Social workers felt they needed training and guidance on the use of digital communication technology with Disabled service users. Areas identified were the technical aspects of digital communications, how appropriate they might be in different settings, and the extent to which these technologies can help, or hinder, social work values. This training might well include information around the availability of digital communication technology support. **Social work managers should ensure social workers get effective training and support on the use of digital communication technologies with Disabled service users.**

6. A place for in-person meetings



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 - interpreted in what I am saying or describing. There is a kind of clarity in our interaction”
(Lorenzo, Disabled service user)

“If you see the person face to face, you always have a bit of a chit chat – ‘Oh my god, it was busy on the road. This or that.’ There are little things in the chit chat that are important, human interaction.” (Isobel, Disabled service user)

“The advantages of meeting people is that they can read your tone of voice, they can see your body language, they can see the impression, they can see the environment. Like I could say I’m doing really well, but be living in a terrible state and being in a terrible condition. I can put a mask on if it’s online.”
(Ahmed, Disabled service user)

The greater use of digital communication technologies has been welcomed by many Disabled service users. Many are still shielding. Some find in-person meetings stressful or exhausting. There can also be a sense of intrusion from home visits. In-person meetings

take time, effort, and travel (for social workers and / or Disabled service users). In-person meetings were reported as helpful to those in crisis or who find digital communication confusing or distressing. They allowed social workers to make holistic assessments and were often key in identifying safeguarding issues. Blind or visually impaired service users said they valued the sensory clues that in-person meetings provided. Body language and tone of voice was also clearer in in-person meetings, which social workers and Disabled service users said was important. In-person meetings provided opportunities for social workers and service users to build a sense of connection and relationship. But both social workers and Disabled service users noted the value of in-person meetings and were keen that these should not be phased out by a move to digital communication. **Adult Social Work Departments need to recognise the value of in-person meetings and ensure that they remain part of the social work offer.**

PART II: Pros and cons of different digital communication technologies: research findings

For different types of digital communication technologies, the study explored;

- 1) what were the qualities that could make it helpful or not (i.e., it allowed visual clues, it was fast etc.);
- 2) the characteristics of Disabled service users who found it helpful or problematic;
- 3) the type of task for which it was helpful or problematic; and
- 4) the way it supported key social work values.

We summarise these here to help you think how best to use (or avoid) different digital communication technologies with service users with a range of Disabilities and impairments. But do remember, even Disabled service users with the same condition may face different barriers in using each digital communication technology.



Video-conferencing, for those who could manage it, was regarded as the next best thing to in-person meetings because it allowed some visual clues or prompts that helped communication. It also allowed a more holistic assessment of someone's needs than other types of digital communication technologies. It allowed synchronous dialogue (an immediate back-and-forth). It saved travel time, energy and money. But as a relatively unfamiliar technology, and one prone to technical glitches and connection difficulties, it could add additional stress to an already stressful situation. Disabled service users, especially those who relied on screen readers, found Zoom was easier to use than Microsoft Teams. But many employers did not allow the use of Zoom.

Email was seen to be good as a record of communication and enabled advance preparation. It allowed for transparency (there is a record of what was communicated when) and was useful for information-giving, pre-circulating documents, etc. It might be particularly useful for those who may want to look up things they don't understand, or those who may need extra time to process information. Email gave only a partial view of a situation. While it might be useful to those finding "live" social interactions stressful or with speech impairment, it was more difficult to use for those finding text-based communication problematic. Email helped speed communication and document exchange (at least for some) but there was a danger of slow or non-existent responses (you ask a question, and it may take days to get a response). Disabled service users thought that social workers routinely putting their hours of work and alternative contact details in their email 'signature strip' would be helpful.

Texting by phone allowed for transparency (there is a record of what was communicated when). It was usually quick to write and read and was good for sending reminders of appointments or for social workers to tell people if they were running late. The absence of lack of visual clues could create problems, and while some people found emojis useful to convey meaning, others found them confusing. Phone texts only gave the most partial view of the situation ruling out a holistic approach and was challenging for those who find text-based communication problematic.

Telephone calls allowed for synchronous dialogue and was quick and convenient. Phone calls were helpful for relationship building but could be problematic depending on the phone signal. Mobile phones created problems with privacy (where is the social worker, where is the Disabled service user?). This could heighten a sense of intrusion, or unpreparedness from unscheduled phone calls particularly if they were to discuss more serious matters. With a phone there was no record of who had said what to whom.

Communication by hard copy paperwork provided a record of what was communicated when, but communication was slow, and needed to be collated and stored. Hard copy needed no hardware or software so was useful to those without access to digital communication technology or those less confident in them. Hard copy *may* offer more confidentiality than digital material. Hard copy is challenging for blind or visually impaired people, those whose impairments make writing by hand difficult or those who find text-based communication problematic. It is important for documents to be sent promptly and for social workers to notify service users when they have sent items in the post. Social workers should also be conscious about whether documents need to be received or handled within a set timeframe, as there may be postal delays. When using hard copy, consult with service users about whether they have any particular needs such as font style or size.

PART III: CONCLUSIONS

Disabled users of social work services are not always given real opportunities to receive and impart information and ideas through all forms of communication of their choice (UNCRPD, Article 21). This is partly attributable to social workers' practice of not always pro-actively offering a choice of options, but also that employers' policies and practices restrict the use of some digital communication technologies. The combination results in a negative impact on Disabled service users and on the practice of core social work values. It is important to match the individual service user with the right digital communication technology (or none) for the task in hand. Social workers need and would welcome further training and guidance from Adult Social Work Departments on the use of digital communication technologies with Disabled service users.



PART IV: HOW WE UNDERTOOK THIS RESEARCH

Academics at King's College London, together with Shaping our Lives, wrote the application for research funding to undertake this work, with input from BASW. Ethical approval for this research was granted by an NHS/Health Research Authority Research Ethics Committee.

Once funded, the project recruited the Disabled lay researchers, who were provided with training for their task of interviewing and analysis, and also given on-going support. An Advisory Group was set up, which included staff from King's College London, Shaping Our Lives, BASW and a range of other experts including experts by experience.

Social workers were then recruited for the research interviews as were Disabled service users. BASW offered CPD certificates to the social workers since the interviews were a structured opportunity to reflect on social work practice with experts by experience. There was no overlap between the two groups of interviewees. That is, none of Disabled service users knew the social workers and none of the social workers knew the Disabled service users.

Semi-structured interview guides were developed for social workers and for Disabled service users and piloted with a small number of interviewees. The semi-structured format allows interviewees to be asked questions on the same topics, which ensures consistency, but also allows flexibility should interviewees wish to share any other experiences or thoughts. Interviewees were offered the chance to participate either in-person (Covid allowing), online, by telephone or email. An online focus group was also run with service users with learning disabilities.

The Disabled lay researchers interviewed 15 social workers and 20 Disabled service users. The interviews were then typed up in full. This approach means that individual responses can be analysed to identify themes which can also be aggregated (for example, all of the interviewees, except one discussed X, only one

person mentioned Y). This allows for generalisations on specific topics (for example, the advantages and disadvantages of video conferencing) to be made. The researchers analysed the transcripts to identify themes, and they were then coded using a software package known as NVIVO that allowed data retrieval and further analysis during the writing up stage.

The project then organised two workshops. These workshops included some social workers who had been interviewed, some other social workers, Disabled service users, some members of the Advisory Group and others working in social work education. The project shared the findings with them and asked them to discuss the findings, interpret them and make recommendations.

The project then wrote up these findings in a range of formats of which this is one. The research ran between May 2021 and February 2022.

The research took place in England and was funded by an England-specific research body – the National Institute for Health Research, School for Social Care Research. However, the availability of specific digital communication technologies is consistent across the four nations of the UK. Put more simply, Teams, Zoom and WhatsApp are the same wherever social work practice takes place, so the project believes this research has lessons for social workers across the UK.

The full name of the research study was:

Improving experiences regarding the use of digital communication technologies in interactions between Disabled service users and social workers in adult services: a qualitative service user conducted enquiry to inform best practice.

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If you would like to give us feedback on this document, please email policyadmin@basw.co.uk

A companion document to this one is called: *Making the Most of the New Normal: advice for Disabled people on the use of digital communication technologies with social workers*. This, and other study outputs is available from <https://shapingourlives.org.uk/report/digital-communication-technology-in-social-work>

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Social Work, Disabled Service Users and Digital Communication Technology: A Practice Guide is one of a series of BASW Research Findings - a series of publications showcasing new evidential research led by university academics and / or social work service users that offer both significant impact and have practical implications for social work practice.

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