

Virtual Meetings Access Guidelines

Ensuring accessible virtual meetings and events



UNISON is committed to removing or reducing all barriers to participation. The South East Region has set the led the way in this through our Working Together Guidelines, Access Standards and Disability Access Passport. It's vitally important that we continue to ensure all our on-line meetings are accessible to all members, and everyone can participate fully. The following guidelines are based on the national criteria for holding meetings, the national guide to open accessible meetings and the regional Access Standards. These must be used for all virtual meetings and events with members, and our Working Together Guidelines will continue to apply.

Before your meeting or event

- The meeting should be solely to provide an update on the work of the union relating to the Covid-19 crisis. Given the difficulties of this type of meeting, decisions that are not time-critical, should be delayed until regular meetings can take place. If decisions are to be made, meetings must be quorate.
- You need to check that all committee members, including those currently dealing with Covid-19, will have an equal opportunity to access the proposed on-line meeting. Firstly, by checking that they have the necessary IT equipment to participate and secondly, that they are not performing vital, frontline roles. If they do not have an equal opportunity to participate, the meeting cannot go ahead.
- Ensure you allow enough notice, at least four weeks, to arrange any reasonable adjustments required, such as BSL interpreters, and for attendees to secure facility time.
- Virtual meetings and events can be more tiring, so consider carefully how long your meeting or event needs to last; they should only last as long as necessary to carry out core discussions. Agendas must be timed, and adhered to. The template agenda must be used.
- If the meeting needs to continue for more than half-hour then regular breaks must be included and the meeting should by default be planned to last no longer than one hour. In exceptional circumstances, 90 minutes may be permitted.
- All attendees should be asked what adjustments they need in the joining instructions for the meeting with reference made to the region's Access Passport. Do not assume members don't need adjustments - they may have non-apparent impairments. The meeting can only go ahead once it's been confirmed that these have reasonably been met.

- Circulate any papers and slides two weeks before the meeting so that members with different impairments have time to read and process the contents.
- Clear instructions must be sent in advance regarding how to access the virtual platform and make clear how the meeting will be run and what functions of the software you will be using.
- If your meeting includes facilitating contributions or questions from attendees, this must be done in an accessible way and let members know in advance through clear indications on the agenda. It may be helpful to allow members a choice of ways of requesting to speak, such as “hand up” and chat functions or text message.
- Test any accessibility options and adjustments you will be using in advance to ensure they work and consider setting up a test session with the individual members requesting adjustments.

Speakers and Contributors

Speakers, especially the Chair, and all contributors, should be advised of the following in advance of the meeting:

- Make sure your face is well-lit and can be clearly seen so that members with visual impairments or who lip read can see you.
- Position your webcam roughly in line with your eyes and back it up a little so that there is space around your face and upper body.
- Be aware that light coming from behind you can shadow your face and can be painful for people with a visual impairment. Do not sit in front of a window – if you must then close the blinds or curtains.
- Use a headset or earphones where possible to improve audio quality.
- Choose the option “blur background” in Teams or if available on similar platforms to reduce distraction and allow a clearer image so that neurodiverse members and those with hearing impairments can focus on what you are saying.
- Provide any slides or papers you will be using two weeks in advance so that members with different impairments have time to read and process the contents.
- Slow down your speaking style and create pauses between sections so members who are taking notes, using live captions or sign language interpreters can catch up.
- If you are using the shared screen function in Teams remember that not everyone can see what you’re referring to. Describe what is on the screen and send presentations or documents in advance.

During the meeting

- There will be a “technical and access facilitator” in the meeting to deal with any access issues during the meeting and ensure everyone can participate.
- The technical and access facilitator can use the function “mute all” and ask attendees to mute themselves when not speaking to avoid feedback and distracting background noise that can affect members with hearing impairments.
- The meeting will not begin unless it is quorate. If ten minutes after the published start time the meeting is still not quorate the call will be closed.
- Attendees should not speak unless called upon by the Chair; this includes responses back.
- If attendees are called away from their screen, or there are any distractions in the background, cameras should be switched off so neurodiverse members can focus.
- Ask people speaking to say their name every time they speak, so all attendees know who is talking.
- If you are using the chat function, be aware that some members may face barriers in using their keyboard or mouse, might have dyslexia or their first language might be BSL rather than English.
- The chat function should be used to raise technical and access issues with the TA facilitator. Contributions to the meeting should be made verbally after being called on by the Chair.
- The agenda will be times and should include when questions or comments are taken on each appropriate agenda item, with timings for this to allow attendees to prepare and have time to input their questions.
- Opportunity should be given to submit questions in advance where possible.
- The Chair should ensure that a wide variety of attendees are called upon to ask questions, this is particularly important as agendas will be timed. Those who have not yet contributed should be called upon first to ensure everyone has a chance to engage in the discussions.
- Ensure the meeting finishes on time so that members who need to eat or take medication, or have caring responsibilities, are not adversely affected.
- Notes of meetings must be taken by an appropriate member of staff and circulated to everyone, including those not in attendance.
- Where there is a decision to be made, in line with national guidance for online meetings, and to ensure everyone can participate, an email vote will be held following the meeting. The proposal will be sent out to all members of the committee requesting a response via registered email addresses within seven days of the meeting. The normal quoracy rules will apply to votes. The committee will then be notified of the outcome.

Guidance on Reasonable Adjustments

Captioning

- If a member has requested speech to text, Microsoft Teams includes the option of live captioning.
- You should advise any members requiring captioning or speech to text that they can switch on this option by clicking the three dots on the control dashboard and selecting 'turn on live captions'.

British Sign Language

- If a member has requested British Sign Language interpretation, we recommend you use a BSL interpreter from Interpreting Matters (office@interpretingmatters.co.uk)
- If using Teams, you should advise the member to "pin" the interpreter to their screen so they can see them at all times.
- The BSL interpreter will also need to "pin" the Deaf member to their screen.
- The interpreter will need to join the meeting in advance of the start time to set up. BSL interpreters should be registered with a national body such as NRCPD (www.nrcpd.org.uk) or RBSLI (www.rbsli.org). It is not appropriate to use trainee interpreters, family members or work colleagues who can use BSL but are not qualified interpreters.
- Sometimes more than one interpreter is needed depending on the length and complexity of a meeting – interpreters need breaks too!

Paperwork

- Please be aware that the region cannot currently send out any hardcopy paperwork from our offices.
- Where Branch offices are open, Branches should be asked to support their respective committee members who require hard copy papers.
- Where Branch offices are closed, committee members must notify the region, who can then arrange for an external printer/postage company to undertake this task. The cost of this will be paid for by the facilitation budget head from the Regional Council budget.
- All paperwork must, therefore, be received in a format that can be accessed on any IT equipment and received at least two weeks in advance.
- No additional papers or presentations can be referenced or used during meetings.