Online Activities

Contents

This guidance is for political parties and their regional structures and branches in Scotland who want to increase the diversity of their membership, candidates and staff. It accompanies the Equal Representation in Politics online self-assessment tool. The free online tool enables you to assess how inclusive your current practice and activities are and provides tailored advice and guidance and an action plan of the steps you can take to advance equality and diversity in your activities.

Equality in our politics and our political institutions is beneficial for everyone. Being inclusive will allow you to attract a diverse range of members to your party and will enrich your policy discussions. Diversity improves democracy at all levels of communities and could have a positive impact on the success of your political party.

This guidance provides parties with information and advice about how to make online engagement and campaigning inclusive by removing barriers and supporting people from protected groups who have negative online experiences or receive abuse online.

There is a checklist at the end of this guidance which suggests actions your party could take to improve your practice in this area.

Why should political parties use technology?

People from protected groups can face barriers in accessing face to face party activities. This might be because the events are held in the evening which can exclude members carrying out caring roles (disproportionately women) or perhaps because an event is difficult to access for wheelchair users. Using technology to connect with members can overcome some of these barriers and make your activities and politics more inclusive. Digital methods can be particularly useful for local parties in rural areas where members might live large distances from each other.

Holding a range of in person and online events is a positive statement about your commitment to equality and diversity and you may already use online platforms to hold meetings or stream your conference. However, online space can replicate or even exacerbate the barriers that women, minority ethnic, disabled and LGBTI people already face when engaging in political activities and discussion. Whilst few people deliberately want to exclude others from political engagement, it is important for your party to take steps in overcoming barriers around digital exclusion.

Digital literacy

Many people are confident using common digital platforms. However, some of your members may find using technology challenging. A lack of digital literacy can create a barrier for members engaging in your activities. It may also prevent local parties having the skills to facilitate online meetings and using technology to engage with members. Without these skills, under-represented groups can be unintentionally further excluded.

If you have a digital skills gap, some things you might want to consider to help your digital activities be more inclusive are:

- A survey of members to find out what skills they would like to develop;
- Digital skills training and demonstrations of how to use common digital programmes online meeting platforms;
- Circulating written 'how to' guides for the platforms or technology you use
- Including digital skills in development plans for local parties;
- Asking members who have digital skills to help train others;

Be aware that technology is often socialised towards men, which means that women may feel more comfortable doing digital training in an all women group. Conversely women who have technology skills may be overlooked for training roles or excluded from sharing skills due unconscious bias.

Consider the ways you advertise technology volunteer roles and make it clear you welcome expressions of interest from underrepresented groups and take steps to facilitate involvement. For example, women often fulfil caring roles which may limit the disposable time they have. Parties might want to consider creating opportunities for role sharing and involving women who have tech skills in shaping what these roles look like.

Digital exclusion

There are circumstances where it is not possible or practical to meet in person for a period of time. For example, due to social distancing legislation or during summer holidays. Providing online activities creates opportunities for members to continue to contribute their skills to the party during these times. Using technology can help prevent decisions being made by a small number of people and is more inclusive for underrepresented groups such as women.

On the other hand, if the party is holding a face to face event, it is also good practice to enable remote, digital participation at the meeting. This can make your
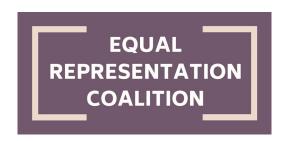
in-person event more accessible to people who cannot attend, for example because of caring roles or because the venue is not fully accessible. Online participation should be meaningful and enable attendees to actively participate in the event. For example, parties should consider enabling remote debate contributions and online voting rather than just streaming a conference or meeting online.

Under the 2010 Equality Act, political parties have a duty to make reasonable adjustments at any event which is open to the public. This includes any digital event. What is considered reasonable will depend on the size and capacity of your group and the type of activities you are doing but accessibility at online events should be a priority for organisations. It is important that parties are working to go beyond the basics of accessibility requirements and are aiming to achieve best practice. Some things you should consider include:

- Ensuring there are no communication barriers to attending. For example, having a BSL interpreter available or closed captions on the screen.
- Clearly stating what accessibility measures are included as standard in your event promotion or invitations
- Asking attendees if they have any additional accessibility requirements when they register for online activities.
- Filming events so people can access them at a different time if they are not able to attend live.
- Having adequate breaks in online meetings.

If you are holding online activities you should also be aware that certain groups, for example minority ethnic members and women are less likely to have the disposable income to buy tech or fast internet connections. Parties could consider subsidising internet or tech costs or providing tech grants to activists, particularly those who have indicated they are interested in becoming candidates or are running campaigns.

More information about reasonable adjustments and best practice in facilitating inclusive online meetings can be found below in the inclusive online meetings

sections of this module or the 'Events Activities and Elections' module guidance of the Equal Representation toolkit.

Online abuse

Parties must respond to online abuse and harassment with the same rigour as they would offline. Online platforms and social media are now a significant channel for engaging in political discourse and activism. Much of this is positive and enriches our democracy. However, people who engage with politics online are at risk of receiving abuse. Candidates, Councillors, MPs and MSPs are particularly likely to experience online bullying and abuse due to their public facing role and because they frequently use social media to communicate with voters and members.

Examples of online abuse include: people targeting abuse at the social media accounts of politicians, upsetting comments in online chat rooms, meeting platforms, blogs and on social media comments and activists using inappropriate language, sharing offensive memes, videos or pictures. People who do this type of behaviour are commonly known as internet trolls. Online activities also provide opportunities for abusive behaviour from other party members, for example indecent exposure or persistent and unwanted attention.

Certain groups are vastly more at risk of online abuse. Women (particularly LGBTI women and women from minority ethnic backgrounds) are much more likely to receive gendered, racialised, sexualised or violent abuse in response to their views or activism. Behaviour like this is rooted in sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist attitudes and is used as a method of silencing those it targets. Online abuse results in people from underrepresented groups being further excluded from political discourse by making them less likely to share their views online, engage in political activities or stand to be a candidate. This creates a barrier for inclusive politics and democracy.

Solving online abuse requires multiple actors to step up but local party groups can act to support their representatives and members to feel safe. Some practical steps you can take are included below.

Responding to online abuse

If you become aware of online abuse towards a member of your party, you should always discuss the situation with the person and talk to them about what they want to do. The abuse may come from people who have nothing to do with the party or a situation might happen where your members carry out online abuse against another member, candidate or elected representative or share inappropriate or offensive material. In both cases, it is important to:

- Have a clear social media and online behaviour policy which includes examples of behaviour that won't be tolerated and states online abuse will receive the same consequences as face to face abuse;
- Have a clear process through which people can report incidences of online abuse;
- Use your disciplinary procedures to reprimand or expel members or supporters who carry out inappropriate online behaviour, online bullying or harassment;
- Make sure that party staff and/or committee members are following the social media accounts of candidates and elected representative so they can report online abuse and support the victims of it;
- Quickly block the accounts of non-members who send abuse to your candidates and elected representatives;
- Have a public statement on your website about your commitment to equality and that abusive or offensive behaviour won't be tolerated. Include this statement in materials given to new members;
- Make sure you have a password for your online meetings and set guidance for expected behaviour at online meetings. You might want to think about
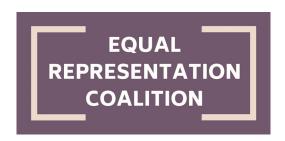
only sending the joining details to an online meeting once people have read and signed up to a code of conduct;

- Ask groups within the party who experience online abuse including LGBTI, disabled, ethnic minority and women's networks to input into strategies for tackling the problem.

There is a tendency to try and deal with incidents of online abuse or trolling by keeping in within the party. However, many inappropriate online behaviours are actually illegal, for example online harassment. If you think someone has committed a criminal offense, you should report it to the Police.

Showing your support

Negative experiences online can be very isolating. Activists who have experienced online abuse don't always feel fully supported by the party, or that the party puts enough resources into tackling abusive behaviour. Parties should have a duty of care towards their candidates and a responsibility to respond quickly to internet trolling and be more explicit about how online abuse and discrimination won't be tolerated. Your response should be discussed with the person receiving the abuse.

For example, if voters have been posting racist comments about one of your candidates, you should swiftly put out a public statement about how their comments are unacceptable, you are proud of diversity and you won't tolerate racism. This sends a message to other minority ethnic people who might be considering joining or standing for the party that you will support them effectively is they experience discrimination. By saying nothing, you are giving the impression that unacceptable behaviour is tolerated in the party.

However, be wary of responding directly to the person posting the abuse. By responding directly, social media algorithms can be tricked into showing the post in a wider range of users' timelines which further legitimises the abuse. In their report

['Don't feed the Trolls'](#) the Centre for Countering Digital Hate recommends avoiding responding directly to online trolling.

Digital self care

Digital self care is a strategy to set digital boundaries, empower victims and reduce the harm caused by online abuse. Digital self care can help increase resilience and reduce the impact of abuse to both the victim and other women who are considering getting involved in political activities.

Steps that parties could do to promote digital self care include giving information or training to members about:

- How to block abusive accounts, set privacy settings, turn off location and mute notifications.
- Being aware of the terms of use of platforms you use and how to report abusive messages
- Using long, strong unique passwords and/or two factor authentication
- How to blur backgrounds and remove items or tags that might give away personal information

People sometimes receive abuse due to being tagged in other people's posts or comments. Party communications teams could consider limiting the amount they tag individual candidates and representatives in party social media posts, or receiving explicit permission before they do so. This may help to limit the amount of abusive messages women see in their timeline.

Proactive action against online abuse

Because online abuse is about silencing it's   targets, it is more likely to happen after a media appearance, debate or event. It can be exhausting and traumatic for victims to report abuse to platform providers because many require each individual
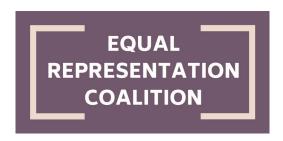
message to be reported separately. Parties should anticipate events that might result in online abuse and consider providing proactive support to women doing media appearances.

Actions parties might want to consider recruiting a 'screening team' to view, screen shot, and sort abusive messages either to report to the social media company or the police. This may result in the victim seeing fewer abusive messages and can promote digital self care.

You could also consider:

- o Having peer support or buddy system for people experiencing online abuse
- o Training a group of members in mental health first aid
- o Offering counselling support for members who are like likely to receive abuse.

Helping activists feel safe

The impact of online abuse can be significant, and recipients can feel unsafe in their offline lives as a result. Online violence, abuse and threats are often made by people the victim has never met or knows nothing about which creates anxiety, fear, and trauma. There is a very real danger than online abuse can lead to offline violence, and women politicians are particularly at risk of this.

It is important that parties take violence against women seriously and support their members if they feel unsafe as a result of contributing to the work of the party. The welfare of the person receiving abuse is the most important thing and you should make sure they have somewhere safe to go, both in an online and offline context.
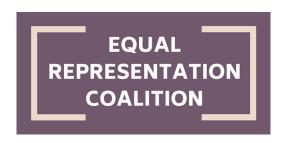
Actions you could consider include:

- Offering transport home for candidates and representatives after media appearance;
- Having a peer support or buddy system to ensure that candidates are contacted after media appearances;
- Reviewing security at party offices and considering installing controlled door entry and panic alarm systems;
- Having an up to date lone working policy for the party;
- Using ID badges for staff and volunteers at party offices;
- Providing opportunities for activists to discuss safety and how local parties can support them;

Parties should also make members aware of how to minimise the chance of doxing (where personal information such as an address is revealed online as a form of harassment). This could include encouraging members and candidates to be careful posting pictures or information that could reveal where you live, where their children go to school etc. Training can be provided for candidates, for example from Fix the Glitch, about how to remove personal information from the internet.

Positive online engagement

Online platforms and social media have meant that debate and political activities can happen in any place at any time of day. Whilst this has many benefits, it can create a culture of presenteeism, where people feel they will only be rewarded or progress in the party if they put in longer hours online or are constantly and quickly responding to posts or news articles online. Presenteeism can be particularly apparent during an election period which is often the most intensive time for parties. There is overwhelming evidence that a long hours, instant response culture can be harmful to your members and your productivity.

Presenteeism can be especially harmful to people from already under represented groups in politics, particularly those who are disabled or have caring roles and acts

as disincentive to putting themselves forward for party responsibilities. It also leads to people being undervalued if they don't post often or respond quickly as this is seen as being less committed to the party.

To promote a positive party culture, it can be helpful to discuss with candidates what their expectations for online activity are before an election campaign. This can also apply to online collaboration spaces such as Slack and private WhatsApp groups. You could also consider enabling them to set boundaries. For instance:

- Candidates might say they only want to post social media themselves during the working week or between certain hours of the day.
- Activists might request that photos of them at events are not posted until they leave a location in order to increase their safety.
- Parties should not automatically expect candidates or activists with prominent party roles to use their personal social media accounts to promote their party role or during an election;
- Encourage a culture of days off from party activities, and provide training in how to turn off notifications.

Parties should consider having structures around candidates and representatives which support them with social media and online engagement, especially during internal selection processes or election campaigns. You might want to consider staff or volunteer support to enable candidates to take breaks from social media. There are positive examples from campaigns where men take on the work of checking for abusive messages, ensuring that women do not need to see them.

Sometimes, there are policy issues which cause a lot of debate and disagreement within a political party. Social media sometimes isn't the best place to debate complex issues or mediate between groups who have opposing views. If a divisive issue arises in your local party, consider whether meeting in person or via a platform that allows more open debate would be beneficial.

Adapting to a digital world

New online and social media platforms are emerging all the time. Parties need to be proactive in knowing the social media platforms your members use so you can support members and candidates to engage with them positively. Parties could consider a regular digital survey to find out more information about how members interact online and what support they would like to engage positively with politics via digital platforms.

Online media appearances

It has become more common to do media appearances from home via the internet. This has the potential to make standing for office more accessible and inclusive for people from under represented groups. However, showing parts of their home can leave activists vulnerable to *doxing* (where personal information such as an address) is revealed online as a form of harassment. Women who have experienced domestic abuse may also be at risk if they appear in their home on camera.

A media interview via remote video link can sometimes be more informal than appearing in a studio for example. However, it is important that your members feel well supported and well briefed about what they will have to discuss when doing media appearances in this format. Some other actions you could consider to support your members include:

- Give members guidance to remove photos and other personal items from the background when doing media appearances in their own home;
- Provide a party space to do media appearances if the member is uncomfortable with being on camera at home;
- Provide a party branded backdrop that people can use for media appearances at home
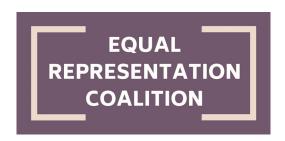
- Include online media appearances as part of your media training. Things you might want to cover include setting up and positioning of webcams, lighting, when and how to mute, and how to ensure the member can hear the questions being asked;
- You could consider offering child care so that women with children at home are not excluded from participating.

You should be having a wide range of spokespeople doing interviews. Including women, disabled people, minority ethnic people and the LGBTI community as spokespeople is a great way to show your commitment to equality and diversity. It can be tempting to always ask the same people because you know that they have previously performed well. However, if you do this you might be missing out on other talented people in your organisation who can do just as good a job, but might not have had the opportunity to showcase their skills before.

To increase the diversity of your panellists, you should be using positive actions. For example, you should consider encouraging speakers from over represented groups in the party to always ask who else is appearing on the panel before accepting an invite. If, for example, it's an all-male panel, have a policy of suggesting a woman in the party to take their place

There is a lot more information about how to make media appearances more inclusive in the 'Media and Messaging' section of the Equal Representation Toolkit.

Facilitating Online Events

Some people assume that online events are easier and require less organisation. However, without good planning and facilitation, online events can create challenges or replicate barriers experienced by under represented groups in face to face meetings. For this reason, it is important to be well prepared and consider how you will make the event inclusive and participatory.
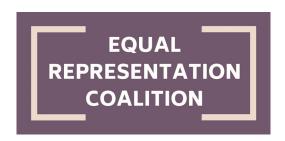
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It is important that the person organising the event has the digital skills to run it online and is familiar with the platform that is being used. You may need several administrators to make sure that everything runs smoothly and that you can respond to technical difficulties. Prepare for an online event like you would an in person meeting and make sure that any speakers or contributors understand what they need to do to participate. Make sure the person facilitating the meeting is online early, is prepared and can welcome people to the event as they join.

To limit the chance of online abuse during the meeting, it is good practice to have members pre-register for an event and only give the sign in details of the meeting once they have given their name and email. You may want to consider having a code of conduct that participants have to sign up to during registration, which states your commitment to equality and diversity and the types of behaviour that won't be tolerated. You could consider removing participants from the meeting who do not abide by the code of conduct.

During the event

Treat an online event like you would a face to face meeting and think about areas which might create barriers to participation. For example, talking over people can be more common in online spaces due to lack of other communication cues. This is a particular barrier for women, who may already experience being interrupted when they want to contribute during face to face events.

Some things you might want to consider include:
- Have the facilitator be in control of muting and unmuting participants. This minimses the chance of speakers being interrupted;
- Be aware of unconscious bias and make sure the facilitator is taking contributions from a diverse range of attendees;
- You could consider asking people to indicate in advance if they want to speak on a particular topic or have questions. This can help facilitators ensure they pick a diverse range of contributors;
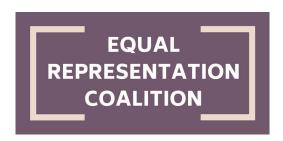
- Be aware of gender segregation of roles and challenge them. For example, women shouldn't be always taking the minutes;
- Online meetings can be really tiring so make sure you think about access breaks;
- Some people might not want to have their video on and that should be respected. It might be that they are concerned about other people seeing inside their home, having the video on is distracting or that they are carrying out caring roles.

Speaking into a microphone during an online event can be intimidating. It can be more accessible to use a variety of ways for people to engage in the event. For example, you could think about:

- using chat functions for people to ask to questions;
- online polling or survey tools to explore the views of participants;
- breakout spaces to allow for more discussion in small groups;
- making it clear that it's ok to attend the meeting and not directly participate.

If you are going use chat or text functions, it can be helpful to have several facilitators so that at least one person can act as a moderator to ensure you can respond to any inappropriate comments or offensive language. You should remind people about the ground rules at the beginning of the meeting, point them to your code of conduct and state any actions such as removing people which might happen as a consequence of poor behaviour.

If you need more help making your event inclusive, The Events, Activities and Elections section of the Equal Representation Toolkit has more information and guidance

CHECKLIST

Digital literacy	
• Digital skills training and demonstrations are provided.	☐
• Developing digital skills is included in development plans for local parties.	☐
• Women with technology skills are able to share these and are involved in training others.	☐

Digital exclusion • Participants are asked if they have any reasonable adjustments when they register for an online activity. • There are no communication barriers to participating in online activities and reasonable adjustments are provided. • Digital participation is meaningful. Online attendees can contribute, speak in debates, ask questions etc. • Online voting by proxy voting is enabled at digital activities. • Members who do not have access to technology equipment are supported to participate	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Responding to online abuse • Party organisers and committees can recognise online abuse and know the party's procedure of how to respond. • There is a clear social media and online behaviour policy which includes: examples of behaviour which won't be tolerated, how people can report incidences and the complaints and disciplinary procedures. • Members who are found to be behaving inappropriately online are disciplined or expelled. • Incidents of online harassment are reported to the Police. • Members receive information about digital self care, blocking abusive accounts and reporting online abuse. • Online meetings are password protected and there is guidance for expected behaviour during online events. • Circumstance which might result in online abuse are anticipated and candidates are offered protective measures such as a 'screening team'. • Parties support members who feel unsafe as the result of online abuse. For example, organising transport and peer support	☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

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Positive online engagement	
• Presenteesim is challenged.	☐
• Candidates are able to set boundaries around the amount they post or respond on social media.	☐
• There is staff or volunteer support to allow candidates and representatives to take breaks from social media.	☐
• There is a policy of not using personal email or social media to contact representatives about party business	☐
• There are opportunities for divisive policy issues within to be discussed in forums other than online or on social media.	☐
• Parties regularly review the online platforms their members use and ask members what support they would like to engage positively with politics online	☐
Online media appearances	
• How to do online media appearances is included in media training.	☐
• A diverse range of spokespeople are used.	☐
• Members doing media appearances from home receive guidance about staying safe and preventing personal information being accessed	☐
Online events	
• Members pre register and there is a code of conduct.	☐
• People running the event are confident with the technology being used.	☐
• There is more than one facilitator.	☐
• Gender segregation of roles is challenged.	☐
• There are a variety of ways for attendees to participate.	☐
• There is a clear process for people to indicate they want to speak and the facilitator seeks equal contributions from women.	☐
• The chat functions are moderated.	☐
• Participants who break the code of conduct are removed from the event.	☐