



Free conference calls, group videos and meeting facilitation

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As SFP members try to address challenges to their local food systems during the COVID19 crisis they are having to explore ways in which they can stay connected to their local partners and to each other. Many will already have been using different audio and video platforms to convene virtual or remote meetings where participants can discuss how to proceed and who is best placed to do what. There is an ever-increasing array of platforms and services that can be used to facilitate virtual meetings, some better than others, some free to use and some relatively expensive.

This brief guide has been put together to help SFP members make a more informed choice about which platform is best for them. It is not exhaustive and tries not to steer members towards any particular solution – that will depend on your specific needs, resources and facilities. It simply aims to provide some basic information about the most commonly used platforms that you will hopefully find useful. For this guide, unless otherwise stated, all options can be used on all operating systems (Windows, Mac, android, iOS).

What you won't find here is a detailed technical guide to the available platforms. If you want more information about how to compare the technical details there are plenty of comparison guides out there on the web. One of the best comparison and review articles I have found is at [PC mag](#). I have provided information on the key features that I think may be useful to people involved in SFP food partnerships and it is based on my own experience and listening to SFP members, other colleagues, friends and family – gathering and sharing their experience and preferences for different platforms.

You will probably end up using a number of different platforms to meet different needs. So, purely as an example, here is my own personal mix:

- **WhatsApp – text messaging** for quick group information sharing within Food Matters and the Brighton and Hove Food Partnership and for arranging video calls
- **WhatsApp – video/audio calls** for 1:1 calls to SFP partnership co-ordinators
- **Skype – video/audio calls** for SFP support team conference calls every 2 weeks and work strand meetings (and to keep connected with my mum)
- **Zoom – video calls** for Food Matters' coffee break catch-up every day (plus morning yoga sessions and a pub quiz on Fridays with mates)
- **Microsoft Teams – video calls** for Food Matters and remote document sharing

Ben Messer – Food Matters and SFP support team

1. Group audio meetings – conference calls

Group calls (conference calls) are nothing new and many SFP partnerships will already have been using different digital platforms for this purpose. What is new is that many co-ordinators and steering group members are no longer working from offices and are having to work from home during the COVID19 'lockdown' and physical distancing restrictions.

As more work is done from home using personal 'phone systems (mobiles or landlines) it may be important to avoid running up large personal 'phone bills. For this reason the Top Tips offered here focus on ways to hold remote audio 'phone meetings for free. This is obviously less important if you have a 'phone package that includes unlimited calls.

WhatsApp – [WhatsApp audio group calls](#)

- How: Download the web app from the Google Play Store or Apple App Store
[WhatsApp set up](#)
- Numbers: Limited to **4 participants**
- Set up: Easy – connect by **mobile 'phone** numbers
- Comments: > Easy to switch to **video** whilst on the call - [WhatsApp switch audio to video call](#)
> Valuable as a **group text** platform – the way many of us have been using it up until now

Skype – [Skype audio group calls](#)

- How: Download from the website or get the app from the Google Play Store or Apple App Store [Skype set up](#)
- Numbers: Limited to **50 participants**
- Set up: Easy – Skype account and connect by **email** on **mobile 'phone** or **desktop**
- Comments: > Need to connect by Skype account name but you need to connect by Skype account name rather than simply by mobile number or email – so all participants need to have Skype accounts
> Easy to switch to **video** call - [Skype switch audio to video call](#)
> Skype to 'phone (not via the web app) costs 1.5p/min. or £6.15/month UK

PowWowNow – [PowWowNow audio group calls](#)

- How: Register via the web app
- Numbers: **No limit** to numbers
- Set up: Scheduling a call-in time, sharing a meeting dial-in number and your account PIN number
- Comments: > Calls charged at your normal call rate rather than being free
> No easy switch to **video** call – needs a £10/month subscription

2. Group video meetings

Whilst group audio meetings are a good way to continue discussing issues and sharing information a greater sense of connection between participants can be achieved through the use of group video meetings. Participants will need to have either a mobile 'phone or computer with an in-built camera or an external usb-connected webcam and microphone (often these are provided in one piece of kit).

Using video is worth it, particularly during the period of physical distancing, because being able to see each other will always enhance connection and communication more than can be achieved through just hearing each other. This may not be sensible or appropriate for larger groups (more than 6 say). However, it is worth considering for smaller groups and for teams who work together regularly. An alternative is to have a limited number of participants discussing and presenting while others are muted and listening but not contributing (they can be unmuted to make a comment).

AnyMeeting - [AnyMeeting video conferencing](#)

- How: Sign up at the website – [AnyMeeting sign up](#) and download the App
- Numbers: Up to **12 people by video**, with a total of 30 attending by audio only, 12 hour time limit
- Set up: Easy sign up from the website (see above)
- Comments: **> AnyMeeting Pro is now free for 2020.**
 - > Excellent and extremely easy video group meetings via a url link invite
 - > **Webinar Pro** is also free allowing you to organise and run webinars (already used by SFP) - [AnyMeeting pro for webinars](#)
 - > Good quality, lots of very informative guides and support and a wide range of very useful features – 12 presenters on video at a time, 200 listening attendees, live chat (texting in), screen sharing (including video sharing) and recording.

Note: From mid-March AnyMeeting has been offering their video-conferencing and Webinar Pro platform for free for the duration of 2020. **But beware** – if you sign up as an organisation you need to enter payment details to receive one free licence for the Webinar Pro package. **So remember** – you will be billed from Jan. 1st 2021 unless you cancel the free subscription! They are probably counting on people forgetting and they probably won't give you a warning!

Zoom - [Zoom video group calls](#)

- How: Register through Zoom website – [Zoom set up and resources](#)
- Numbers: Up to **100 people** with up to 49 on screen at a time
- Set up: Don't need Zoom account to participate – you just click a link in your invite and the software you need will download
- Comments: **> 1:1 video calls unlimited time** BUT for group meetings duration is limited to **40 mins.** (Note: after 40 minutes you can restart the meeting for another 40 minutes and keep repeating)
 - > You can pay £11.99/month for a Pro account allowing you (if you really want to) to host meetings for up to 24 hours! For additional features and pricing see [Zoom pricing](#)
 - > Very user-friendly and good quality image and sound.

- > [Zoom screen sharing](#) is a useful feature and also [Zoom meeting recording](#)
- > [Zoom break out rooms](#) are another useful feature – allowing participants in a large meeting to split off into separate discussions, returning later

Note: Concerns over data protection and privacy mean that some Local Authorities may be unable to use zoom or their firewalls will block it. This may not be a major concern for most food partnerships but if it is a concern read this [Zoom security issues article](#)

Skype - [Skype video group calls](#)

- How: Download from the website or get the app from the Google Play Store or Apple App Store [Skype set up](#)
- Numbers: Up to **50 participants**
- Set up: Easy – Skype account and connect by **email** on **mobile 'phone** or **desktop**
All participants need to be signed up with Skype accounts
- Comments:
 - > Very easy to start a video call and invite others (if they have a Skype account) to join
 - > Useful additional features [Skype features](#) including [Skype screen sharing](#)
 - > Skype for business has now become part of **Microsoft Teams** (see below)

Microsoft Teams - [Teams online meetings](#)

- How: Many larger organisations and Local Authorities will already have Teams through a **paid subscription with Microsoft Office 365**
- Numbers: Up to **250 participants** in a group video call – the screen shows yourself and the last 4 people to speak on the screen at any time.
- Set up: Host needs Teams account to schedule and invite participants
- Comments:
 - > Easy to integrate with other features of Teams – [Teams screen sharing](#), [Teams meeting recording](#) and text chat.
 - > You can schedule and invite participants who are in your Teams contacts to meetings
 - > Can invite external guests via meeting link in an email – they don't need to be on Teams – [Teams invites](#)
 - > **Free version of Teams** available without MS Office 365 subscription – [Guide to set up](#) and get the app here [Get MS Teams for free](#)

WhatsApp - [WhatsApp video group calls](#)

- How: Download the web app from the Google Play Store or Apple App Store [WhatsApp set up](#)
- Numbers: Limited to **4 participants**
- Set up: Easy – connect by **mobile 'phone** numbers
- Comments:
 - > Can video call anyone in your contacts list via mobile – no sign-up needed
 - > Only possible via mobile 'phone – desktop video call not available
 - > Good for mobile phone 1:1 video calls or small group calls

Cisco Webex - [Webex video-conferencing](#)

- How: Free sign-up through the Webex website using email address
- Numbers: Up to **100 participants** can join a video meeting with up to **25 on view**
- Set up: Only the host needs to have an account to invite participants
Participants can only join a meeting if invited by the host
- Comments: > Webex also has a wide range of features (including [Webex screen sharing](#)) and functions with different pricing plans [Webex features and plans](#)
> Recording meetings is not included in the free plan

Google hangouts

- How: Through Google or Google Chrome – just look at the list of google apps. on the Google home page
- Numbers: Up to **10 participants** with no time limit (up to 150 can participate by text-based chat) – all 10 on screen at any one time
- Set up: Hosts need Google or Gmail account but can invite anyone and they join via the invite link [Start a Hangouts video call](#)

Facetime

- How: Facetime only for users of iPhone, iPad or Mac products using iOS
- Numbers: Up to **32 participants** – but only those also using an iPhone etc.
- Set up: Through the Facetime App on iPhone or Mac using your Apple ID

3. Remote group meeting facilitation

If you want to make sure your video call goes smoothly and is as productive as possible you should set some basic **ground rules** and appoint a **facilitator**. For a small group call the facilitator could be one of the call participants – usually the host. For larger groups you should consider appointing someone who is external to the group to facilitate and not participate at all (or as much) in the call discussions. In many ways conference call facilitation is the same as facilitation of an actual meeting – the focus of facilitation should be on an approach that is inclusive, non-judgemental and participatory. In addition, for a conference call the facilitator should aim to establish an environment where participants can connect and communicate easily with each other and where they can contribute as much or as little as they want to. Try it and see.

Ground rules

- Join the call 5 minutes before it is due to begin
- Eat before the call – not during
- Be considerate – listen to others and don't dominate the call
- Remember – the call is a group conversation and is about sharing
- If you have nothing to add, add nothing
- If you need to leave early, say so at the start

Facilitation tips

- Ask participants to **talk slowly and clearly**, using **short sentences** and **leaving pauses** in what they say to allow others to add comments and contribute – leave space for others to ‘jump in’
- In larger groups ask everyone to **introduce themselves** at the start and say their name each time they speak (in smaller groups where people know each other this will not be necessary)
- It may be useful to establish some simple **hand signals** for participants to use to get the facilitator’s attention or to interject when someone is speaking. For example:
 - raising your hand with a single finger raised to get attention or interject/jump-in
 - holding up your hand up palm facing forward to call a stop to a discussion if too many people are talking at the same time
 - thumbs up to agree with a point
 - pointing to your ear if you can’t hear
 - pointing to your mouth if you think others can’t hear you
- If you hear/see someone miss a ‘jump-in’ (e.g. they try to say something and get talked over), **go back** to them at the next opportunity to allow their contribution to be heard and included
- In larger groups establish a **speaking order** for the group allowing you to **go-round** the group asking for individual contributions, one-by-one, on issues.
- **Summarise and check** key outputs or agreements after discussion on each issue before moving to the next
- Give a **5-minute warning** before the call ends to allow any last issues or points to be raised
- **Summarise and check** the call’s key outputs before ending the call

And finally, for a really interesting and useful guide to video calls have a look at suggestions from [Spoon Rooms](#) – **a way to make video calls more sociable and less awkward!**