

JSCC Discussion - Striking a balance with face-to-face vs live online learning

North Herts Council has had online learning available to staff since the introduction of a Learning Management System in 2013, staff are able to access eLearning modules for essential learning at a time that works for them. Online workshops were available, but it wasn't until the Covid pandemic in March 2020 that all face-to-face learning was suspended, and a switch was made to fully online learning. All our apprentice training providers also switched to online learning, to ensure that the apprenticeships were able to continue, they have continued with this model post pandemic.

At this time, we adapted our Induction process, producing several videos that are available on demand, for staff to view within their first few days. We also introduced a virtual New Starter Get Together which is an informal session, allowing new starters to meet others who have recently joined the organisation, together with other key team members. This now alternates between a live online session and a face-to-face session to allow staff to choose the format that best suits their needs, it is too soon to say which is proving the most popular.

Many training providers have found that there are several benefits to continue delivering workshops online and the improvement in technology means that engagement and interaction during online learning is greatly improved with the use of the chat function, polls, word clouds and breakout rooms.

We have found that there are benefits to both live online learning and face to face learning:

Benefits of live online learning

- Reduced expenses for external trainers.
- Reduced time away from the working day for employees.
- No extra travel time for those not based at the training location.
- Reduced vehicle use.
- Accessible for anyone who has access to a laptop.
- Closed Captions available for learning delivered via Microsoft Teams.
- Low cognitive load for those who struggle in a social situation (ability to introduce in the chat rather than face to face).
- If difficult subject matter, then easy to discreetly remove yourself.
- Ability to deliver content quickly.

Benefits of face-to-face learning

- Better opportunity to meet people and build relationships.
- Practical skills can be demonstrated.
- Ability to ensure all participants are engaged.
- If difficult subject matter, then the trainer can more easily monitor attendees.

Finding the Balance

We are continually reviewing the learning and development on offer and the ways in which it's delivered. We are constantly in dialogue with staff to understand what works well for them and the challenges that they face. There is no "one size fits all" as differing learning styles, working patterns and personal preferences mean that some staff prefer one option over the other.

We look to make a decision on the approach based on the learning objective of the session and if there needs to be a lot of interaction, relationship building or practical skills demonstrated then we would prefer that this is delivered face to face. If it lends itself more to information giving with a limited amount of interaction to a greater number of people then we will consider online. A blend of a session that is both live online and face to face provides additional challenges for the facilitator and participants, so we avoid this delivery method unless it is absolutely necessary. Of course, there are some circumstances where we are bound by the delivery methods of the training providers and by how prohibitive the costs may be.