RCVS Mind Matters

Supportive spaces: Building veterinary events that promote wellbeing



In collaboration with MMI Taskforce members

avs The Association of Veterinary Students

BSAVA

BVA British Veterinary Association

BVNA British Veterinary Nursing Association

RCVS

spvs

vetlife Support for the veterinary community

vmg Veterinary Management Group

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Introduction

Events provide a valuable opportunity for people to come together, network and share ideas. When organising an event, it is important to consider potential barriers to participation so that delegates feel safe, included and able to fully engage.

When speakers and attendees feel comfortable and included, they are more likely to engage openly in discussion and share perspectives on complex or sensitive topics.

This guide, developed by representatives from organisations within the Mind Matters Taskforce, is designed to help event organisers create spaces where everyone feels safe, included and able to participate. It draws on the experiences of veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses, students and subject matter experts, alongside evidence and guidance from leading UK organisations and charities.

Regardless of the size or frequency of your event, this guide is intended to be a helpful starting point. Creating more inclusive events is an ongoing process, so we encourage organisers to seek feedback and continuously learn from attendees' experiences.

How to use this guide

At the end of this guide, you will find a summary of key takeaways and practical checklists. If your event is approaching, these can be a useful place to start to help identify any areas that may need further consideration.



Dr Zara Kennedy MRCVS
Chair of RCVS Mind Matters Initiative

About the MMI Taskforce

The Mind Matters Initiative Taskforce, is made up of representatives from key veterinary and veterinary nursing representative bodies. They meet twice a year to discuss MMI, current issues, project updates from all members, acting as a sounding board for ideas, a facilitative group for promotion and communication on key topics and campaigns.

A task and finish group from within the MMI Taskforce was set up to collaborate and create this guide.

- Association of Veterinary Students (AVS)
- British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA)
- British Veterinary Association (BVA)
- British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA)
- Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS)
- Veterinary Management Group (VMG)
- Vetlife

1. The use of content and trigger warnings

By Dr Rosie Allister FRCVS (Vetlife)

This section of the guide covers what content and trigger warnings are, and their potential purpose. It considers some of the evidence on their use and describes when and how they might be used.



What are content and trigger warnings?

Although there may be overlap between the terms, content and trigger warnings are sometimes used to have different meanings and defined separately. Definitions of content and trigger warnings vary.[1]

The meaning of both terms isn't about being static - it's about being 'a shared cultural concept that can meaningfully shift over time'.[2]

Definitions often involve elements of:

Content warning (CW): A content warning is a statement alerting attendees to the presence of potentially sensitive content in a session. This could refer to topics such as images of surgery, sensitive political issues, or descriptions and images of graphic injuries.

Trigger warning (TW): A trigger warning alerts people to content that could lead to a strong emotional, physiological or psychological response, particularly for individuals with past trauma. Common triggers might include content related to abuse, self-harm, or specific potentially traumatic events.

What is the purpose of content and trigger warnings?

The purpose of content and trigger warnings, if used at conferences and events, is to allow people to make informed decisions about whether and how they want to engage with a session that contains particular material some delegates may find difficult.

What does the evidence say about content and trigger warnings?

There is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of content and trigger warnings, and there are various debates around their use.

Some studies[3] have suggested trigger warnings might be ineffective or harmful. These have included suggestions that they might not help reduce distress, may increase anticipatory effects, and could cause harm by increasing focus on difficult content and cause people to dwell on it.

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1 George and Hovey 2020, Nolan and Roberts 2023
2 Bridgland et al 2022
3 Bridgland et al 2022 and Jones 2020

Others[4] suggest that trigger warnings are inclusive, promote a more compassionate space, enabling people who have experienced trauma to feel more in control.

There have been discussions about whether trauma-informed working in educational settings should focus less on trigger warnings and more on flexibility and other aspects of trauma-informed work (trauma-informed pedagogy).

A study with medical students examined perceptions of trigger warnings in medical education, with a range of support and non-support across the study group. Some expressed that warnings allowed students to know what is coming and to prepare themselves. Some felt they needed to learn and cope with highly sensitive material as part of their job. Trigger warnings were felt by some to help students understand the severity of the material.[5]

Used alone, trigger warnings may not be protective, but they can be a useful tool when embedded in a broader holistic approach.[6]

The International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) has produced guidance[7] on trigger warnings, highlighting research suggesting that trigger warnings are not helpful, and at times might be potentially harmful, but that many expect trigger warnings to be given and are upset when they are not. They recommend that trigger warnings should provide a resource for reliable information on the content rather than overly sensationalising or emphasising that it is disturbing. They also recommend:

'When communicating or sharing content that might be difficult, hard, painful or even hurtful to others, it is important to think first. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is the reason I am sharing this content?
- What do I hope I and/or others will get out of me sharing this content?
- Is the content appropriate for all age groups to see or hear?
- Could the content hurt someone who has a connection to the content that I am sharing? (Keeping in mind that different people can often react differently to the same content).'



4 Karasek 2016
5 Beverly et al 2018
6 Bryce 2022
7 IASP 2026

Considerations for use at events

At veterinary meetings and events many clinicians may be familiar with graphic images of surgery. However, there are often others who may be less accustomed to such images, for example, non-clinical members of the veterinary team, as well as support staff around the venue. Online meetings may also be overlooked by children, and providing information about session content may help people to plan about what they want themselves or those with them to see.

Effective and clear titles for sessions may serve the function of a content or trigger warning where they are descriptive and make clear the main topics covered in a session. Ambiguous or humorous titles as sometimes used at conferences do not do this.

Whether or not you use content and trigger warnings may also be determined in part by the context and by your audience. Content and trigger warnings may be more valued by some groups. Knowing the community you are speaking to is important.

Consider the purpose of your session – is provocation necessary or is the focus to be inclusive, or to develop specific competencies? This may help inform decision making about content and trigger warnings.

Critique of using content and trigger warnings alone has shown they are more likely to be effective in a wider context and considerate trauma-informed environment.

How to use content and trigger warnings

If using content and/or trigger warnings:

- ### Be clear and specific:
  Specific warnings may be better than general ones. For example, rather than 'sensitive content', instead describe the material covered. For example, 'this session contains descriptions of fatal injuries and photographs of surgery', or 'this session discusses sexual harassment and sexual violence'.

- ### Give advance notice:
  Consider whether warnings should be included in the programme, the event website, and email communications before the event as well as at the start of a session.

- ### Support opt in/opt out
  Try to make it straightforward for people to leave a session or not attend if they feel uncomfortable.

- ### Reflect whether the content is needed
  Encourage speakers and chairs to consider whether graphic detail or shock content supports the objectives of their session. Some content may be more easily justifiable than others.

- ### Provide support and quiet spaces
  Ensure that signposting to resources and the supports available are visible in advance of, during, and at the end of sessions with potentially disturbing content. Consider offering a quiet space for delegates to use if they are needing a break.

2. Considerations for effective chairing



By Dr Rosie Allister FRCVS (Vetlife)

Chairs play a vital role in supporting the wellbeing of those attending, including speakers, at events and conferences. As well as managing time, chairs set the tone of the session and convey value and respect for participants. They may also deliver important information and signpost to support.

Points to consider:

Respectful timing

Make sure sessions begin and end at the expected times – this is important for inclusion and wellbeing as well as event flow. Ensuring speakers each have the expected amount of time available to speak and preventing overrun from earlier speakers sets a respectful tone.

Clear communication

Make Clear, accessible communication from the chair is important for respect and safety. Please refer to section 4 on accessible communication for neurodivergent audiences.

Set expectations

Communicate in advance with speakers about expected timings and access. Check on the day that speakers know their session length and current timings, and arrangements for questions as well as any technical issues. Reducing uncertainty can make speaking less stressful.

To promote inclusion in the session, let delegates know the schedule and how they can contribute. Ensure instructions and guidance are clear and follow good practice guidance on accessibility in communication.

Setting an inclusive atmosphere

Welcome and acknowledge the importance of different perspectives and encourage input from all attendees.

Create space for people who may feel less comfortable speaking up, but without forcing people to speak.

Consider attendees' immediate needs

Physical access and comfort

Please refer to chapters 8 and 9 on accessibility of venues. This is vital. Also consider, where possible, making sure that the physical space is comfortable (such as, temperature or lighting, among others). Provide breaks when needed and encourage people to stretch or take a moment if they need to and ensure that this is built into the programme.

Be aware of emotional wellbeing

Be alert for indications that those attending the session might be stressed, disengaged or overwhelmed. A short break, or acknowledgment of how challenging certain content may be, may help.

Advance contact and preparation

Make contact with speakers in advance of the session where possible to understand any support needs they have for the session.

During the session

Be attentive during the session for attendees' needs.

Be prepared to act on inappropriate content from speakers or attendees – where necessary agreeing with conference organisers what action will be taken. Check with the organisers on their policies with regards to poor behaviour.

Support respectful discussion

Consider whether deliberately provocative session titles or content are needed.

Support respectful discussion in the session. Intervene calmly where necessary to stop disrespectful language or behaviour. Try to acknowledge different viewpoints while maintaining event integrity.

Remind speakers and delegates if the session is being recorded or live streamed.

Follow up with speakers

Speaking can be quite a vulnerable experience – check in with speakers afterwards and offer positive feedback where possible.

Signpost to support services, such as appropriate helplines for delegates where sessions may have included difficult content.

3. Protecting new joiners and considering loneliness and isolation

By Niamh Young (Previous AVS Student Welfare Rep) and Rebecca Robinson MRCVS (VMG)

It can be daunting to arrive at an event not knowing anyone. This section sets out some suggestions for how to make your event a more comfortable and enjoyable experience for those attending alone whether they are exhibitors, speakers, volunteers, or attendees.



Pre-event considerations

Please refer to chapter 4, considering pre-event information that may support neurodivergent audiences.

Pre-event information can help manage anxiety and provide information about logistical questions that attendees might have in mind. If you have a number of speakers or streams, providing enough key information ahead of the event can help new joiners plan effectively.

Create a welcoming and easy to navigate environment

- Use clear signage with maps and itineraries including events and socialising opportunities, to allow independence around the venue.
- Encourage discussions between smaller groups of people by considering the layout of rooms where workshops are being held, for example, cabaret style.
- When designing social spaces, consider how to make it easier for individuals to meet one or two people at a time. For example, by providing small tables with two or three seats or other seating arrangements. Providing designated areas for different groups of people with common interests can also help.
- Consider allocating space for quiet zones for breaks from meeting new people and the hustle and bustle of a busy event; include wellbeing activities and wellbeing zones for anyone to use.
- Pronoun badges can help individuals to feel comfortable with how they are addressed. Ensure that the font on these is legible. Magnetic badges can be a more comfortable alternative, or consider having this printed on lanyards, alongside names.
- Communicate health and safety information including where and who to go to for support – make sure this support is easily identifiable. For example, trained Mental Health First Aiders usually wear green lanyards.

The use of technology to encourage inclusivity

Below are some ways in which technology can improve the experience for attendees:

- Use social media groups prior to the conference to encourage attendees to find people with similar interests or to connect with people they already know. Be aware of the risks involved in this kind of networking and provide guidance around safe usage.

- Consider an event app, which can be used to help attendees plan ahead by providing all the event information in one place. However, this should be an opt-in opportunity to safeguard those who want to keep their details confidential. Whatever the size of the event, ensure that you're legally compliant with data handling (GDPR), which includes the use of event apps.

- Embrace digital methods that can help encourage strong attendee participation. Interactive polling apps, such as Slido, allow attendees to provide thoughts, feedback, and engage with the sessions. Consider whether allowing anonymous options could be right for your event to enable more people to be part of the session.

- Provide charging points for personal electronic devices as well as WiFi passwords so that individuals can access all relevant information. This can help minimise stress, for example, to check that trains are still running on time.

- Provide areas where technology is discouraged so that attendees can switch off in wellbeing spaces.

Networking and connecting people

- Organise structured social events such as themed clinical/ethical discussions, speed-meeting/networking opportunities or pub quiz type activities. Use an open invite and consider randomising and allocating groups if needed. These may include conversation starters as part of the activity to prompt interaction. Not all social events need to be large and loud. If it's feasible and right for your audience, provide an option that is smaller, quieter or less pressured.

- Consider buddy programmes, for example, grouping first time attendees with at least two other people to help them navigate the conference and introduce them to others.

Content delivery

Consider diverse representation across panels and hosts to reflect a broad spectrum of backgrounds, as well as job roles to promote inclusion.

- Include, where possible, a wide range of discussion topics and workshops to cater to your audience. For more challenging or sensitive session topics, consider how to make session content clear and signpost to support (See chapter 1 on the use of content and trigger warnings).

- Provide inclusive language guidelines for all presenters and inform them of the potential diversity within the audience so that they can effectively tailor their language.

Getting to and from the event space and social spaces

To make sure people feel confident getting to and from the event, you could do the following:

- Provide detailed information on safe travel routes to and from the conference, particularly to the train station, nearest taxi rank and bus station. Many venues will have videos of routes and photos of the venue.

- Provide a list of accommodation, at a range of costs, within easy reach of the venues.

- Provide contact details for local taxi companies.

If different venues are being used for content delivery and social events, consider laying on regular shuttle buses between them at appropriate times.

Staff and volunteer training

- Create a code of conduct for everyone involved in the event, as well as training or a briefing for all staff and volunteers. This could include information on alcohol consumption management (see chapter 6 for further information on alcohol and wellbeing at events).

- Consider mental health awareness training for staff members so that they can support individuals who may need support on the day.

- Publicise safety information including where/who to go to for different types of support. For more information please also refer to chapter 5 on suicide prevention.

Feedback

During and after the event ask attendees, including speakers and staff, on how to improve your event for future attendees.

4. Designing for neurodivergent attendees and speakers

By Angharad Belcher and Rapinder Newton (RCVS)

The RCVS and British Veterinary Chronic Illness Support (BVCIS) Disability and Chronic Illness survey (2023) showed that up to 30% of the responding population within veterinary were either diagnosed or self-diagnosed as neurodivergent.

Did you know 1 in 7 people in the general population are neurodivergent?[8]



Neurodiversity

Neurodivergence is a way of explaining that many people will think, assess and experience the world in different ways. They may be diagnosed with autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), dyslexia, sensory processing disorders or something else. However, we're all unique and those without a diagnosis could also benefit from the recommendations below. When you design an event with neurodiversity in mind, everyone benefits. When you don't, you risk alienating and causing distress, confusion or low levels of engagement.

Event planning and design

Choosing your venue

- Consider a location that has breakout areas, quiet space or a wellbeing room for attendees to go to if they need.
- Consider sensory-friendly lighting and acoustics.
- Ensure that signage at the venue is clear so attendees can navigate around the venue easily. Consider signs and maps (including maps provided on the day).

Programme scheduling and structure

It can be tempting to jam pack your day with interesting speakers and streams, which although great for CPD, can be exhausting.

- Create an easy to follow and predictable timetable.
- Build in reasonable breaktimes giving attendees enough time to attend to their needs.
- If possible, consider hybrid participation, or the option to make recordings available for those who are unable to attend.

8 Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust 2025

Pre-event communication

If you are advertising your event, consider letting people know in advance that they can ask for adjustments, or let them know what accommodations might be required. Let them know if a wellbeing space is available. Some may require this information in advance when deciding whether or not to attend the event.

During the registration stage, provide participants, including your speakers, with the opportunity to ask for anything that they need in a safe and non-intrusive way. For example, "Please let us know if there is anything you need to help you fully participate in this event (such as accessibility needs, adjustments, or support). This question is optional, and your information will be handled sensitively."

Pre-event information packs

A pre-event information pack, sent well ahead of the event, allows predictability and helps individuals plan effectively. Consider including the following:

- Details of the venue, and a map of how to get there from the nearest stations, bus stops.
- Timetable/programme for the day.
- Catering details - where possible provide information about what will be available on the day from main meals to smaller refreshments. If catering is not included, state available facilities close by.
- Visuals of the venue – for example, foyer or seating area.
- Sensory warnings: noises, smells or lighting with understanding language encouraging attendees to bring with them any useful tools such as headphones or ear defenders.
- Dress code, ideally with pictures of previous events.

On the day signage and communication

Ensure that signage around the venue is simple and clear. Make sure there isn't too much text, and that the colour-contrast is accessible.

Sensory considerations and provision of tools and support

1) Lighting: avoid strobe, flickering or harsh overhead lighting. Where strobe lighting is used, ensure this is made clear in advance. Where possible provide low lighting areas for people who may need to step away.

Tools: consider providing sunglasses or making it clear that attendees are welcome to wear their own.

2) Sound: loud, sudden or background noise can all be dysregulating. Ensure microphone quality is tested beforehand, and background noise is minimised or controlled.

Tools: some events with multiple speaker streams use headphones to minimise background noise. Encourage attendees to bring their own headphones.

3) Scents: strong smells and scents can be overwhelming. Speak to the venue beforehand about minimising strong scents, including cleaning products, air fresheners and products used in toilets.

Tools and support: where possible, use fragrance-free or low-scent products and avoid diffusers, air fresheners and other added fragrances. Allow attendees to bring their own sensory anchors such as a scent stick.

4) Personal space: consider the layout of the venue and how closely chairs are placed next to each other. Busy lunchtimes can be particularly overwhelming.

Tools and support: consider priority lunches and/or seating, spreading lunch over a longer period, or provide quiet seating options.

Communication and interactions

Presentations and workshops

- Provide presenters with guidance beforehand on ensuring any slides are written in an accessible fashion, such as making sure colour-contrasts are in line with accessibility guidance.
- Where possible, consider alternative formats, such as ensuring slides are available upon demand, using subtitling and/or providing handouts.
- Where events are digital or hybrid, allow chat-based engagement for those attendees who may prefer to communicate via text or anonymously.

For staff and volunteers

- Provide all staff, volunteers and speakers with information on understanding sensory overload before the planning stage so that this can be built in from the start.
- Provide guidance to staff, volunteers, speakers or any mental health champions on how to provide support to attendees in a discreet and respectful manner, without being intrusive.
- Ensure that acceptance of stimming and movement as regulation strategies is made clear, so that individuals are not seen as misbehaving.
- Tools: provide fidget toys on tables for attendees or encourage them to bring their own, and ensure space is available for those who can't sit in formal seating (for example, a larger space at the back of the room to sit on the floor or stand).

5. Suicide prevention

By Dr Rosie Allister FRCVS (Vetlife)

Conferences can be a difficult time for some attendees. People may be away from protective factors such as family, friends and pets. There may be alcohol, which can be a risk factor for some people in suicidal behaviour. Social and other pressures may mean that people with pre-existing vulnerabilities can be at risk.



Considerations for event organisers

Ensure signposting to supports

Ensure that there is signposting to helplines such as Vetlife or Samaritans if there is any potentially distressing content at the event. Signposting should ensure phone and text options are available to suit different needs and preferences.

Consider supporters

Some larger events have tried having trained listeners or supporters on site to support delegates in distress. This may be helpful but also requires careful planning including safeguarding, policies to support boundaries, training of supporters, risk management, supervision, and physical spaces for support.

Have policies to respond to emergencies

Include mental health emergencies in emergency planning and policy for the event or, if using an external venue, check their policies on first aid and mental health first aid. You may find that they have processes that you can use.

Communication

If the event discusses suicide, ensure attendees, staff and volunteers are aware of this in advance and can opt out. Ensure you have clearly communicated this to the venue as well to ensure their staff are protected.

Ensure any sessions discussing suicide are labelled as clearly as possible. Consider timing for these sessions:

- Near to a break can make it easier for attendees to opt out of the session.
- Not at the end of the day or event as attendees are less likely to be alone immediately after the session if they have found it difficult.
- Allow chairs to swap out if necessary.

Follow good practice guidance about talking publicly about suicide

Sensationalising, over simplifying or politicising suicide can increase risk. There are good practice guidelines on responsible portrayal of suicide and a guide for talking about suicide in veterinary settings.

6. Alcohol and wellbeing at events



By Dr Rosie Allister FRCVS (Vetlife)

The decision whether to serve alcohol at conferences or events involves weighing risks and benefits. It is traditional and may be expected by attendees in some industry settings for alcohol to be available – for example, conference dinners or 'happy hours'.

Alcohol being available at conferences and events can be perceived to have benefits. It may promote socialisation and social connection and encourage informal relaxed environments that support relationship-building.

There are also risks to serving alcohol. Legal and liability risks are not within the scope of this guide but include considerations around licensing. From a wellbeing perspective, alcohol-induced behaviour at conferences may be disruptive or inappropriate. There may be a range of safety risks if people are intoxicated.

Attendees may also choose not to drink due to health, personal or religious reasons. The exclusion of non-drinkers due to social pressures around alcohol consumption could mean events focussed around alcohol alienate those who are non-drinkers. If events including alcohol are a core part of the meeting this may make an event non-inclusive.

Alcohol can negatively affect mental health, particularly for people with previous harmful alcohol use or for some people with mental health conditions.



Wellbeing considerations around alcohol for conference and event organisers:

If serving alcohol:

Choice:

- Offer high-quality non-alcohol options; wherever alcohol is available at the event avoid having only water or fruit juice.
- Ensure non-alcoholic options are presented in a similar fashion to alcoholic options, for those attendees who may not be comfortable with others knowing that they are abstaining from drinking alcohol.

Coordination

- Ensure staff have received training on how to handle issues related to intoxication, including safety issues.

Communication

- Ensure events involving alcohol are advertised clearly so attendees who wish to avoid these for health, personal or religious reasons, can do so. Ensure that non-alcohol drinks are made available at events and that this is communicated in any promotions and advertising.

Minimising harms

- Have policies around alcohol provision that encourage moderation and responsible drinking to minimise harms associated with overconsumption.

Safety

- Develop clear emergency protocols for staff to follow if they need to intervene with an attendee who may be intoxicated or distressed.
- Ensure safe transport options are clearly communicated and available to all attendees.

Inclusion

- Ensure that not all social or networking events are centred around alcohol.
- Respect personal choice. Attendees should never feel pressured to drink.

7. Supporting veterinary and veterinary nursing students

By Niamh Young (previous AVS Student Welfare Rep)

Entering the veterinary professions as a student can be an exciting time and events offer a wealth of opportunities for learning, networking and professional development as well as providing a brilliant introduction to the industry. However, being new to these spaces can be intimidating for a number of reasons. Here are some key points to encourage student attendance at events and protect wellbeing.



Acknowledging and normalising knowledge gaps

Many students may feel intimidated by the level of expertise of qualified veterinary professionals at conferences. It's important to acknowledge this and create an inclusive learning environment by:

- Ensuring speakers are aware there will be students present and asking them to encourage questions from all knowledge backgrounds.
- Encouraging speakers to define technical terms and provide context for more complex topics when appropriate.
- Labelling talks and sessions as 'student-friendly' where appropriate.
- Offering dedicated student workshops and discussion groups that allow students to engage without judgement.
- Providing question submission options to reduce anxiety around asking questions in front of experienced professionals (such as through anonymous Q&A platforms like Slido or Mentimeter).

Fostering a sense of belonging

As students are often at the beginning of their veterinary journeys, it can be difficult to feel a sense of belonging. To bridge this gap, organisers can:

- Designate student ambassadors or mentors to help students navigate the event, introduce them to professionals and advise them on appropriate talks.
- Provide optional stickers for lanyards/name badges to highlight individuals as students in a positive manner.
- Advertise the event as student friendly and remind other attendees of their presence.

Creating safe spaces for students

To help minimise overwhelm for students at professional events, organisers can:

- Create a designated student-friendly space (such as a student zone or stall) to use as a base to decompress and connect with other students.
- Ensure student spaces have clear, visible information about support services and where to seek help within the conference.
- Ensure congress maps and itineraries advertise student-friendly spaces so they are easily accessible.
- Advise stewards of designated student spaces and encourage them to promote them.

Encouraging inclusive and supportive dialogue

Industry events can focus heavily on qualified professionals. To foster a culture of openness and inclusivity for students, organisers can:

- Offer structured networking opportunities, such as speed networking, to make interactions less daunting (see chapter 3 on protecting new joiners).
- Provide discussion prompts or icebreaker activities to help initiate conversations between students and professionals.
- Encourage speakers to actively welcome and acknowledge student attendees at the start of their talks and welcome questions from students at the end.
- Advise speakers talking on advanced topics to consider adding annotations into their presentations, which may make more difficult concepts clearer for student attendees.
- Invite student participants onto panel discussions to demonstrate the valued position students hold within the industry and to encourage student perspectives to be shared.
- Set clear expectations for respectful communication for all attendees and discourage elitist or dismissive attitudes.

8. Event planning and execution: physical safety and accessibility



Dr Anna Judson FRCVS (BVA)

Psychological, physical and emotional wellbeing are deeply interconnected, particularly in live event environments, where stress, fatigue, sensory overload and physical risk can coexist. Attendees will be affected differently, depending on their own needs, health conditions, neurodiversity or disability.

An attendee's mental state has the potential to impact their physical safety and resilience, just as physical conditions, which includes barriers and lack of accessibility, can impact emotional regulation, inclusion, dignity and wellbeing.

This chapter includes a checklist for organisers to consider for physical safety and accessibility planning. It is a practical starting point to promote inclusion and risk awareness. It's not an exhaustive list and should be adapted to the nature of the event. You may wish to consider a similar checklist approach for event set-up, event delivery, packing up and post-event wash-up. Further checklists can be found in the event checklists and templates section of this guide

Physical safety and accessibility: choosing an event venue:

1. General venue accessibility

□ Accessible entrances wide enough for wheelchairs and mobility aids, with ramps and elevators where needed.
□ Clear, high-contrast, easy-to-read signage throughout the venue.
□ Unobstructed pathways and corridors with adequate space for mobility aids.
□ Emergency exits accessible to individuals with mobility impairments, with appropriate signage and assistance plans.

2. Parking and transportation

□ Accessible parking spaces and electric charging points near the venue with clear signage.
□ Drop-off zones close to the entrance, safe, and easily accessible.
□ Accessible public transportation options nearby or shuttle services available.

3. Restrooms and facilities

What is a Changing Places toilet? It is an accessible facility providing extra space and equipment to support people with complex disabilities who cannot use standard accessible toilets independently.

□ Accessible restrooms clearly marked and properly equipped.
□ Private, accessible spaces for personal care or assistance.
□ Designated quiet or rest areas for attendees in need of a break.

4. Seating arrangements

□ Flexible seating that accommodates mobility aids and different physical needs (for example, larger chairs, adjustable seating).
□ Reserved seating areas for wheelchair users or individuals with mobility challenges.
□ Clear sightlines for seating arrangements, particularly for individuals with visual impairments.

5. Sensory considerations

□ Noise management:
  ○ availability of noise-cancelling headphones.
  ○ ability to provide areas which can be designated as quiet zones.
□ Lighting that is non-flickering, soft, and adjustable for those with sensitivities, visual conditions or epilepsy.

6. Pathways and navigation

□ Event spaces are all wheelchair accessible.
□ Venue size and capacity ensure walkways can be provided free from obstructions for example, furniture, cords, or decorations.
□ Edges of trade stands are height-controlled, clearly marked and visible.
□ Large clear safety and other signs/ map to assist with navigation.

7. Safety and emergency preparedness

□ On-site medical staff and first aid kits readily available, with staff trained to assist individuals with special needs.
□ Clear, accessible evacuation plans, with trained staff to assist attendees with disabilities in emergencies.
□ Fire alarms with accompanying visual signals (for example, flashing lights) for attendees with hearing impairments.

8. Accommodations for different disabilities

□ Mobility impairments: wide doors, elevators, ramps, and accessible seating areas.
□ Hearing impairments: sign language interpreters, assistive listening devices, and captioning for sessions.
□ Visual impairments: materials in braille or large print, and assistance for guide dogs.
□ Neurodivergence: suitability of venue to provide structured environments and access to quiet spaces.

9. Food and drink

□ Accessible food and drink stations for attendees using mobility aids.
□ Allergen-friendly food options clearly labelled to accommodate diverse dietary needs.
□ Flexible meal times, where possible and reasonable, to accommodate medical or dietary needs.

10. Assistive technologies and services

□ Assistive listening devices available for those with hearing impairments.
□ Live captioning or real-time transcription services for sessions and presentations.
□ Event app availability with accessibility features, for example, maps, schedule alerts, and real-time updates.

11. Staff and volunteer training

□ Staff trained to understand and assist attendees with disabilities and extra needs.
□ Empathy and sensitivity training for staff to encourage respectful, patient interactions.
□ Clearly identified staff members trained in accessibility for easy attendee assistance.

9. Reasonable adjustments

By Rapinder Newton (RCVS)

Very few people want to deliberately exclude people from attending their events, but often, little or no priority is given to accessibility.

In the RCVS Disability and Chronic Illness in Veterinary Work and Education survey, 87% of respondents with a disability or chronic condition reported having more than one condition, demonstrating the importance of considering inclusion in the context of disability.



About reasonable adjustments

In Great Britain, the Equality Act 2010 prohibits discrimination against individuals with protected characteristics, including disabilities, in order to safeguard them from unfair treatment.

The Act prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in public life and broader society, including employment, education and access to services. In Northern Ireland, this protection is provided under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Under this Act, organisations are required to make reasonable adjustments. These are reasonable steps that must be made to prevent a person's disability putting them at a disadvantage compared to others. This means when planning an event or congress, it's important to think about how attendees with mental or physical challenges or disabilities might be affected (either as a delegate or speaker). The Act states that these reasonable adjustments must be anticipated in advance of the event.

Pre-event communication

It's important for attendees with disabilities or chronic illnesses to know about accessibility and any adjustments available at your event. Provide as much clear and accessible information as possible in promotion materials and in the lead up to the event.

You must also allow attendees to inform you about what accessibility requirements they may require. Ensure this is done lawfully, respectfully and in compliance with data protection law (UK GDPR) (see also chapter 4 on designing for neurodivergent attendees and speakers).

For example:

Don't ask "do you have a disability" or "what is your medical condition"?

Do ask "do you have any access requirements we should be aware of" or "please let us know if you require any adjustments to attend this event".

When requesting this information, state why you are doing so (in order to make reasonable adjustments in line with the Equality Act 2010).

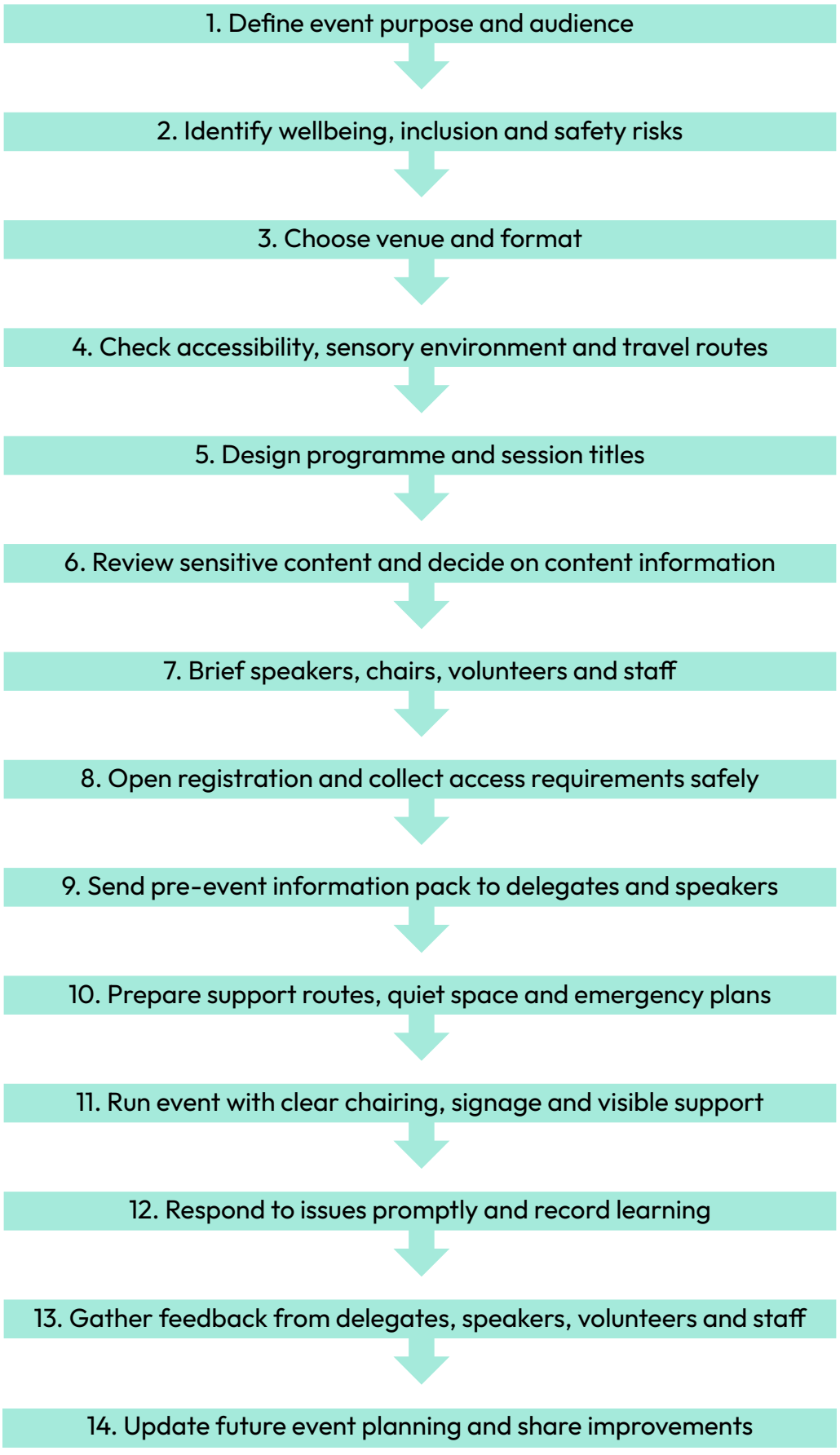
Ensure that this is a standard question for all attendees. As not everyone can use online forms, offer other alternatives too, such as email, telephone or relay services.

10. Top tips and key take aways

1. Plan in advance, considering the needs of different audience members, including speakers and volunteers. This includes the needs of those with accessibility requirements, chronic illness, pregnancy and speakers/attendees who are neurodivergent.
2. Encourage speakers and presenters to define terms, use plain English and avoid jargon to ensure talks are accessible and can be understood by those who are new, such as students.
3. Provide clear headers for talks and events, making it clear if there is a potentially sensitive topic, so individuals can plan whether or not to attend.
4. Prepare your session chairs and ensure they know and understand the role they play in creating an inclusive and safe environment.
5. Consider the needs of new joiners and those who may be lonely or isolated. Think about how the event could bring people together, particularly those who may not know anyone else at the event.
6. Ensure all attendees, including speakers and chairs receive a pre-event information pack in a timely manner, to help individuals plan effectively and ensure some predictability.
7. Signpost effectively throughout the event to sources of support and ensure speakers who are talking about potentially sensitive topics signpost to resources in their presentations.
8. Look for venues that have a separate breakout space or wellbeing area, where possible, for attendees to be able to step away if needed.
9. Ensure that when considering catering and refreshments, a variety of beverages are available in addition to alcohol. Consider alcohol-free events.
10. Build in feedback and evaluation so that you know what's working well, and where improvements may be required.

Event checklists and templates

A: Flow chart: steps to organising a safe and inclusive event



B: Core event organiser checklist

Stage	Key considerations
Purpose and audience	Define who the event is for, including vets, veterinary nurses, students, speakers, exhibitors, volunteers, staff and first-time attendees. Identify whether the event includes sensitive elements.
Governance and risk	Complete an event risk assessment covering physical safety, accessibility, mental health emergencies, alcohol-related risk, safeguarding where relevant, and incident escalation. Agree who has authority to intervene if behaviour is unsafe or disrespectful.
Venue and access	Check step-free access, accessible toilets, hearing support, captioning options, signage, quiet or wellbeing spaces, lighting, acoustics, seating flexibility, emergency exits, accessible parking and transport links.
Programme design	Avoid overloading the timetable. Build in breaks. Avoid placing distressing sessions at the end of the day. Label sessions clearly, including whether they include sensitive subjects, graphic images, suicide, harassment or other potentially distressing content.
Registration	Ask all attendees whether they have access requirements or adjustments they would like organisers to know about. Avoid asking for diagnoses or unnecessary medical details. Provide a non-digital route for access requests. Ensure data is handled safely.
Pre-event communications	Send venue maps, travel information, timetable, catering details, dress code, accessibility information, quiet space details, sensory information, photographs of the venue and named contacts for help.
Content and speakers	Ask speakers to use clear language, define technical terms where needed, avoid unnecessary graphic detail, prepare content information where appropriate, and signpost support for sensitive topics.
Chairing	Brief chairs on timing, respectful discussion, inclusive participation, how to intervene, signposting support, recording or livestreaming notices, and how to support speakers before and after sessions.
New joiners and solo attendees	Offer optional buddying, first-time attendee meet-ups, small-group networking, clear signage, structured social opportunities and ways to connect without pressure.
Neurodivergent attendees	Provide predictable schedules, clear signage, sensory information, quiet spaces, lower-stimulation areas, alternative participation routes, accessible slides and acceptance of stimming, movement or regulation tools.
Students	Brief speakers that students may be present, offer anonymous questions, student ambassadors or mentors, student-friendly spaces and beginner-friendly context where appropriate.
Alcohol	Ensure non-alcoholic drinks are available and presented with the same care as alcoholic drinks. Avoid making all networking events alcohol-centered. Advertise alcohol-related events clearly.
Support and signposting	Make support information visible before, during and after relevant sessions. Include Vetlife, Samaritans and local event contacts where appropriate. Make sure support routes include text and phone options.
On-the-day delivery	Use clear signage, visible staff or volunteers, tested AV, working microphones, accessible Q&A routes, scheduled breaks and respectful chairing. Monitor crowding, noise, fatigue and distress.
Feedback and improvement	Ask delegates, speakers, volunteers, students and staff what worked, what was difficult and what should change. Record improvements for future events.

C: Venue questions checklist for event organisers

Use this checklist when speaking to prospective venues. It can be used before confirming a booking, and again closer to the event to check that arrangements are in place.

Accessibility and reasonable adjustments

Question to ask the venue	Response / action needed
Is there step-free access from the entrance to all event spaces, including registration, session rooms, catering areas, toilets and social spaces?	
Are lifts available, working, clearly signposted and large enough for wheelchair users and mobility aids?	
Are there accessible toilets close to the event spaces?	
Is there a Changing Places toilet on site or nearby?	
Are there accessible bedrooms available if accommodation is part of the event?	
Is accessible parking available close to the entrance? How many spaces are available?	
Is there a safe drop-off point close to the entrance?	
Are routes between rooms wide enough for wheelchair users, mobility aids and assistance dogs?	
Can seating be adapted for wheelchair users, people using mobility aids, people who need larger chairs, and people who need to sit near exits?	
Are there spaces for assistance dogs, including a suitable spending area?	
Does the venue have hearing loops or assistive listening systems? Which rooms are covered?	
Can the venue support live captioning, BSL interpretation or other communication support if required?	
Are fire alarms supported by visual alerts for people who are deaf or have hearing loss?	
What is the evacuation plan for disabled attendees, speakers, staff and volunteers?	
Are personal emergency evacuation plans needed, and how would these be managed?	
Can venue staff support attendees with access needs in an emergency?	
Are maps, floor plans and accessibility information available in advance?	
Can the venue provide photographs or videos of entrances, rooms, toilets, lifts and key routes for pre-event information?	

Section C - Venue questions checklist for event organisers

Food, drink and catering

Question to ask the venue	Response / action needed
Can the venue cater for common dietary requirements, including vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, halal, kosher and allergen-specific needs?	
How does the venue collect, record and manage dietary requirements?	
How does the venue prevent cross-contamination for allergens?	
Will food be clearly labelled, including allergens and dietary suitability?	
Can ingredient information be available on request?	
Can food and drink stations be reached by wheelchair users and people using mobility aids?	
Can seating be made available near catering areas for people who cannot stand for long periods?	
Can the venue offer quieter or earlier access to catering for people who find queues or crowds difficult?	
Can water be available throughout the event, not only during breaks?	
Are non-alcoholic drinks available wherever alcohol is served?	
Can non-alcoholic drinks be presented in a similar way to alcoholic drinks, so attendees are not singled out?	
Can alcohol-free social options be supported?	
Can the venue provide food at set times, and what flexibility is available for attendees who need to eat at particular times for health reasons?	
Can attendees bring their own food if required for medical, religious or access reasons?	
Are there fridges or safe storage options for medication, expressed milk or food brought for access or medical reasons?	

Section C - Venue questions checklist for event organisers

Sensory environment

Question to ask the venue	Response / action needed
What is the nearest train station, tube station, tram stop or bus stop?	
Are routes from public transport step-free and well lit?	
Can the venue provide accessible travel information from nearby stations and bus stops?	
Can the venue provide photographs, maps or videos of the route from public transport to the entrance?	
Are taxis and accessible taxis readily available nearby?	
Can the venue recommend local accessible taxi providers?	
Is there safe parking nearby, including accessible parking?	
Are routes from car parks to the venue step-free and well lit?	
Is the entrance easy to find from the street?	
Is event signage permitted outside and inside the venue?	
Can temporary signage be displayed at key decision points?	
Are there safe routes between the main event venue and any evening, social or accommodation venues?	
If delegates need to move between venues, can shuttle transport be arranged?	
Are there known safety concerns in the area, particularly for people leaving after dark?	
Can venue staff support wayfinding on arrival and during the event?	

Section C - Venue questions checklist for event organisers

Venue staff, policies and incident response

Question to ask the venue	Response / action needed
Who is the named venue contact before and during the event?	
What first aid provision is available on site?	
Are venue staff trained to respond to access needs, distress, intoxication, harassment or safeguarding concerns?	
What is the venue's process if an attendee becomes distressed or unwell?	
What is the venue's process if there is harassment, discrimination or unsafe behaviour?	
What is the venue's process if an attendee is intoxicated and at risk?	
Can the venue support a private space for a sensitive conversation if needed?	
How are incidents recorded and shared with the event organiser?	
Are there other events taking place in the venue at the same time, and could they affect noise, crowding, routes or safety?	
Can the venue confirm all agreed access, catering, sensory and safety arrangements in writing before the event?	

Final confirmation before the event

Item to confirm	Confirmed
Step-free routes checked and available	☐
Accessible toilets identified and signed	☐
Quiet or wellbeing space confirmed	☐
Catering and allergen arrangements confirmed	☐
Non-alcoholic drink options confirmed	☐
Hearing support, captioning or communication support confirmed where required	☐
Lighting, sound and sensory considerations checked	☐
Travel information prepared for delegates	☐
Signage plan agreed	☐
Emergency and evacuation arrangements agreed	☐
Named venue contact confirmed	☐
Incident escalation route agreed	☐
Venue has confirmed arrangements in writing	☐

D: Checklist by attendee type

General delegates

Area	Checklist
Before the event	Clear joining instructions, venue access information, transport routes, accessibility information, programme, session descriptions, catering information, support contacts and quiet space information.
On arrival	Clear registration, visible support staff, accessible signage, maps, pronoun or name badge options, easy routes to toilets, quiet spaces, refreshments and session rooms.
During sessions	Clear session timings, accessible slides, good microphones, clear chairing, respectful discussion, anonymous or written Q&A options, content information where needed.
Wellbeing	Quiet space, breaks, hydration, visible support information, non-alcohol social options, clear escalation routes for concerns.
After the event	Feedback route, support signposting, access to slides or recordings where possible, and information on how changes will inform future events.

Speakers

Area	Checklist
Before the event	Confirm timings, aim for a diverse audience, accessibility expectations, AV arrangements, recording or livestreaming, support contacts and understand access requirements.
Content	Use clear session titles, identify sensitive content early, avoid unnecessary graphic detail, define technical terms where appropriate, and use accessible slides and good colour contrast.
During the event	Know where to go, who the chair is, how questions will be handled, what to do if a session becomes difficult, and how to access support.
After speaking	Offer a check-in, especially after sessions involving sensitive or personal material. Gather speaker feedback on the event experience.

Volunteers and event staff

Area	Checklist
Role clarity	Provide role descriptions, escalation routes, boundaries, emergency contacts and named leads.
Training	Brief on accessibility, respectful communication, sensory overload, quiet spaces, access requests, distressed attendees, alcohol-related incidents and unacceptable behaviour.
Visibility	Make volunteers and staff identifiable through badges, lanyards or clothing, while ensuring this does not compromise sensitive support roles.
Safeguarding and boundaries	Clarify what volunteers should and should not do. Provide a clear route to hand over concerns to trained staff or venue teams.
Debrief	Offer a post-event debrief, especially if volunteers handled distress, conflict or emergency situations.

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