

## Microsoft Teams Meetings at Deaf Action

Microsoft Teams has proven to be an indispensable tool at Deaf Action during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been especially crucial in the engagement for our deaf staff and have found it to be the best platform to make meetings accessible out with the office.

After receiving several requests from other organisations on how we use teams with deaf staff, we have decided to share what has worked well for us as an organisation.

### **Pinning? Why is that so crucial?**

The biggest challenge during meetings is including interpreters effectively and that is where 'pinning' comes in!!

Currently, the set-up of Teams is very much focussed on audio-input: if someone talks or makes a noise, their video will pop on to everyone's screen. This is far from ideal for deaf people: the interpreter 'falls off' the screen while they need to see them to access the information, and so is a deaf person who uses signed language.

However, the function to 'pin' allows a participant in the meeting to keep the people they want on the screen. In Teams in the UK, the maximum number of people being pinned is four – but Microsoft has revealed that this functionality will go up to nine in the next few weeks ([see here](#)). Anyone can pin who they prefer, and it will not impact other people's screens. This means that every participant can choose whether they would like to see the CEO, their (deaf) colleagues, and/or one or two interpreters.

However, for externals to your organisation, this function to pin is not available, while it is evident that external interpreters need to be able to pin the deaf people that they are working with (you need to see sign language in order to be able to interpret). And this why we have come up with some 'Hints & Tips' below on ways to get around this!

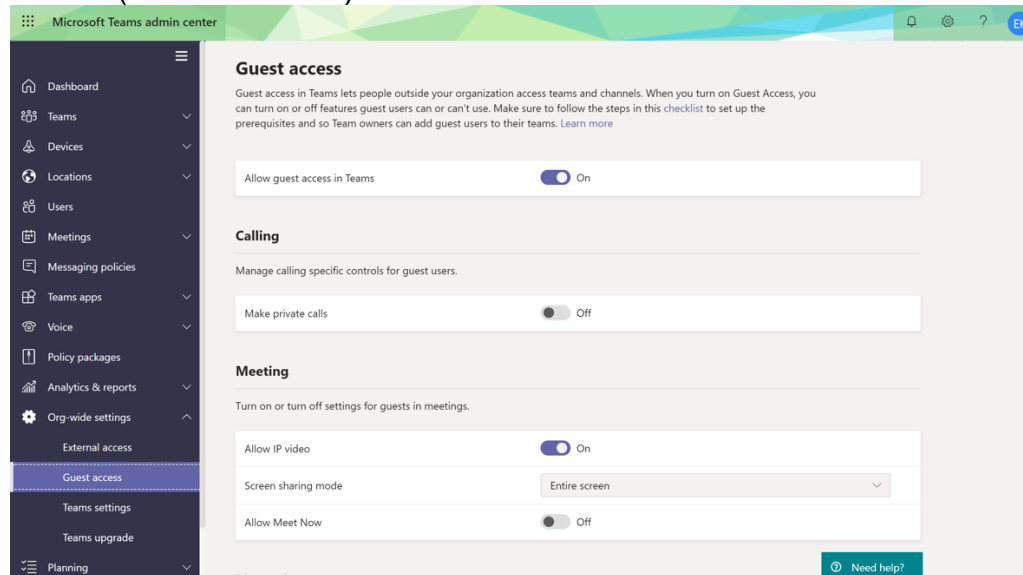
## Deaf Action Hints & Tips

### Befriend your IT department/company

Make sure that you have a good relationship with the people who have access to the Teams Admin side. They need to be willing to change, adapt, and test to what works best in your situation.

### Seeing externals' videos

As video calls are necessary in meetings with deaf people, the first hurdle is to make sure that external people can share their video; often external people get the error message “video sharing is disabled by the admin”. This is where the admin side comes in: ‘Allow IP video’ needs to be enabled in ‘meeting policies’, and, of course, ‘allow guest access in Teams (see screenshot).

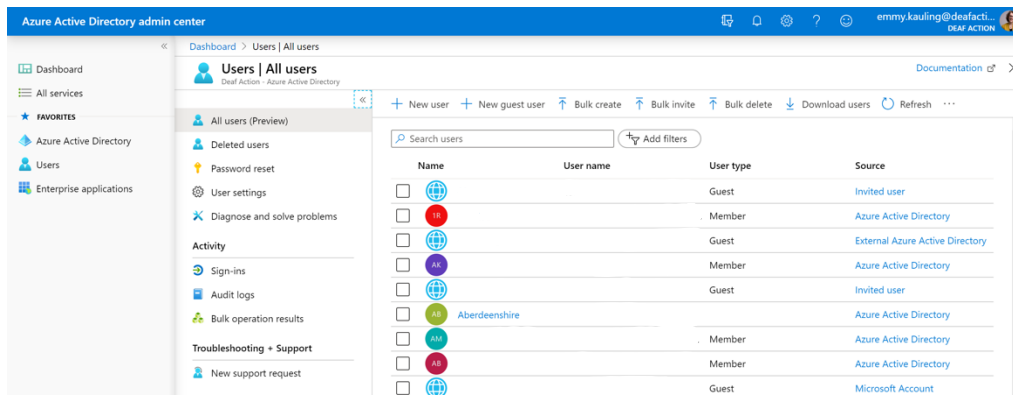


## Inviting externals to your organisation

In order to provide external people with the full functionality of Teams (i.e. the option to pin), more action is required if they do not have a Teams licence already. If they do, you can invite them to the meeting with the email address that they have the licence with, and they will have access to all Teams' functions.

However, when externals *do not* have a Microsoft365 licence yet, the following steps are required (see also [Microsoft's instructions](#)):

1. Every external that needs the full functionality of Teams needs to be added to Azure by your IT administrator (i.e. for hearing externals these steps might not be needed). By adding them in the Azure directory, the email address is now allowed 'more access' to an organisations' virtual environment. See it as a registration at the reception before you can enter a building.



2. In order to properly allow them into your organisation, you need to invite them to a Team in Teams. In Deaf Action, we have created a team 'DA Interpreters', which has no other function than allowing interpreters in our meeting spaces. Instead of hanging around our virtual space (or 'our building'), we now give them guidance to more specific areas (or 'the floor where our interpreters meet'). This is something that the bookings- or interpreter coordinator can do.
3. Once they have access to that Team, they can be invited to meetings and they will have the necessary functionality (but still not the same as the full functionalities that people with licences have). You can 'point them to a meeting room' by sending an invitation. It is important that the interpreter is logged in to Teams before they click the link in the invitation, and that they are logged in with the *same* email address as the invitation has been sent to.

### **Other helpful accessibility features in Teams**

We have noticed at Deaf Action that Teams has some other helpful features for deaf people:

- For English speaking countries, the function to have live captions is available. Not great for a-typical English speakers, such as people with 'deaf voices' and 'new speakers' of English, but it generally works well for native English speakers.
- If you receive a voicemail message, you receive an automated transcript of the message in your inbox which is quite accurate.

### **Future accessibility improvements according to Microsoft**

Microsoft continues to improve their applications, which is shared in the 'Admin centre' of Microsoft365 (some tech-savvy staff can be given limited access to the Admin side and they can see those messages and stay updated). A few promised improvements:

- Instead of pinning up till four people, it will be increased to nine people – and Microsoft will continue to work on increasing this number (expected completion of roll-out: early May).
- A 'raise hand' function will be added, which will allow chairing and turn taking to be better managed (instead of the loudest person gets to speak first) (expected completion of roll-out: mid-April).
- The option to have the chat and participant's list in separate windows (expected completion of roll-out: end of May).

### **Chairing is caring**

While Teams provides the platform, our CEO, being deaf himself, understood the importance of strict chairing from an early stage in this process.

In principle, all microphones are muted unless someone wants to contribute, and they are given the turn by the chair. In meetings with more than three deaf people, at the moment deaf people who wish to contribute either indicate that to the interpreters or type their names in the chat function. The chat function itself is not encouraged to use during meetings for 'chats' – only for clarification and turn taking purposes. The chair allows time during turn-taking for the (un)pinning of participants and interpreters.

While Teams is a great tool, some adaptations in chairing a meeting have proven to be effective as well to try and create an equitable experience for both deaf and hearing participants.

### **Finally, ...**

This information is based on Deaf Action's experience of using Teams and what has worked well for our organisation. It is crucial that employers listen to their deaf staff to ensure they find a solution that works best for them.