

I was approached by a villager who explained that her mother was self-isolated and she and her sister wanted to be able to have a conversation with her mother simultaneously. What did I recommend? She even suggested it would be a suitable article for the Parish Magazine!

Please understand that I do not necessarily have hands-on experience in all the possibilities I've addressed below!

Basic Conference Calling

You can set-up a basic conference call with your landline or with your mobile.

Landline

If your landline phone has a 'R' (Recall) button you can set-up a three-way call. Most modern landline phones have this option so you can have three people talking simultaneously.

To set up a three-way call do the following:

1. Dial the first person. When they answer say something like "Please hold, I want to patch in xxxxx. You'll hear some beeps. If you can't hear me after a minute please hang up and I'll call you back".
2. Press the R button. You should hear the dial tone and the party on hold should hear beeps.
3. Dial the additional party. When they answer say something similar to them re patching in the original party and then press the R followed by the number 3.
4. All parties should be connected.

You do not need to activate this – it should just work. It certainly works on BT and Plusnet. The only other thing to note is that you as the dialling party will pick-up the call costs. These costs will be the two ordinary calls and a one-off connection fee – currently 69p on BT and 40p on Plusnet.

When you hang-up all parties will be disconnected.

Mobile

Call merging is built into both Android and iPhones. The good news is that there is no one-off connection fee and the calls come out of your standard minute allowance. The even better news is that you don't need to do all the dialling as you can also patch incoming calls into the conference.

It seems that with up-to-date phones you can have up to 5 parties on a merged call although this may be subject to operator restrictions. I believe that, as with the landline, when you hang-up all parties will be disconnected – you are the boss!

The good news is that Android and iPhone worked in much the same way:

1. Call the first party and tell them you want to patch in someone else;
2. Open the phone menu (typically tap the phone icon again) and tap 'add call';
3. Call the additional contact in the normal way;
4. From the menu you can merge the calls into a three-way call;
5. Repeat to add additional people to the call;
6. To add an incoming call to the conference, 'hold' your existing conference and then answer the incoming call and tap merge to join everyone together.

Video Conferencing

Video conferencing is a step above basic conference calling as it allows you to see the other participants and therefore makes the whole process seem less remote! Some tools are cross platform (i.e. can be used on a mobile, tablet or personal computer), some are limited to a specific manufacturer (i.e. Apple) and others are mobile only. Any mobile multi-participant video call does

mean that the videos of each participant are fairly small on the phone screen – however you should be able to make the individual videos full screen.

There are various video conferencing tools and I can't hope to cover them all here. I've covered the main ones.

FaceTime

This is an Apple tool (not a Facebook tool) and therefore can only be used by those with iPhones and iPads. There is a group feature which allows multiple parties (up to 30 apparently) to be connected simultaneously.

Apple users will almost certainly be more familiar with FaceTime than I am! It is free and there is no charge for using it*.

WhatsApp

Most people are familiar with WhatsApp and it's group chat feature. The Cornwell's lifestyle would fail without it!

Many people are less familiar with the Group Calling feature. As the WhatsApp website says: Group Calling allows up to four participants to video call with each other using WhatsApp.

There are detailed instruction on how to set-up Group Calling on the WhatsApp website but, in principle, it's as simple as starting a video call with the first participant and then simply using the 'add participant' option on the menu.

The WhatsApp Group Calling feature is limited to use on mobile devices. In other words, you can not use the Group Calling feature from the PC WhatsApp application.

WhatsApp is, of course free and there is no charge for using it*.

FaceBook Messenger

Facebook Messenger's video chat supports up to six participants. It's cross platform (as far as I can tell) it can be used on any platform support by FaceBook Messenger) and free to use*.

I've absolutely no idea how to use it but I'm sure that all the FaceBook addicts out there already know and, of course, there is plenty of information on the net!

Skype

Skype is a slightly more grown-up group chat and video conferencing application. You can have up to 50 participants in a call. Use is free* and it cross platform and can be used on a mobile, tablet or personal computer.

Others

There are multiple other options. Google Duo is Android's answer to FaceTime but is cross platform in that it works on Apple products as well. Signal Private Messenger is like WhatsApp but open source and allegedly more private than WhatsApp. Snapchat can apparently have video chats with up to 16 participants. Viber is another WhatsApp competitor – more popular in the USA than here.

Then there are the industrial strength business video conferencing and screen sharing applications which offer full video conferencing features such as GoToMeeting, join.me and Webex. There are also multiple dial-in conference calling solutions.

* = When I say 'free to use' you should note that the applications will use data (quite a lot of data) and therefore if you are not using wifi you will be eating into your monthly data allowance – if you have one.