Thinking Safety First: Reflections for Online IPV/DV Intervention Delivery

Digitalisation has become increasingly prominent across mental health and support services, particularly since COVID-19. This shift has also reached interventions with IPV/DV perpetrators, where online or hybrid formats are being explored in assessment, engagement, and programme delivery. Yet these practices remain in an early, experimental phase. Evidence is limited; research and longitudinal data are scarce; and no clear conclusions can currently be drawn about effectiveness, risk, or sustainability in perpetrator work.

As a result, practitioners are navigating largely uncharted territory. While online approaches may offer accessibility, continuity, or engagement benefits, they also introduce significant risks, uncertainties, and ethical dilemmas—especially in contexts where safety, accountability, and behavioural change are central.

This document aims to support reflection and informed decision-making, not to prescribe solutions. Cases and programme settings vary widely; no single model fits all; and in some situations, online services may be inappropriate, unsafe, or counterproductive even if carefully designed and monitored. The reflections below draw on emerging mapped experiences across Europe (WWP EN, 2025), and on insights developed before robust empirical evidence was available (No To Violence, 2018; Vlais & Campbell, 2020).

Online perpetrator interventions therefore occupy a tension-filled space: they may broaden access and create flexible engagement pathways, yet they also risk reinforcing lower-intensity, less accountable formats as replacements for comprehensive behaviour-change programmes (ANROWS, 2023; Spencer et al., 2021).

Thus, the key consideration is not whether online work is inherently “better than nothing,” but:
Under what conditions, for whom, and with what safeguards can online perpetrator interventions be delivered safely, ethically, and in ways that genuinely support accountability and victim-survivor safety?

The questions below are intended as conversation starters for practitioners, programme designers, and organisations to think through readiness, risk, feasibility, and ethical implications at different stages of the programme. These are crucial reflections that should take place before a perpetrator programme decides to move to the online context, and they might result in the programme deciding not to move forward online.

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At the programme start

Rationale	Eligibility, Suitability & Exclusion Criteria	Digital Safety, Security & Tech Infrastructure	Multiagency Collaboration & External Support
What are the rationales for using online delivery (accessibility, continuity, engagement, crisis adaptation)?	What are the specific eligibility criteria for participation in online delivery?	Are the chosen platforms secure, end-to-end encrypted, GDPR compliant, and tested for reliability?	What collaborations can you establish with local services?
Is it appropriate for the target population and the specific risk profiles you work with?	What are the exclusion criteria, especially for high-risk cases (e.g. ongoing coercive control, stalking, shared devices, access to victims in the same household)?	Does the participant have their own device, or do they share it with someone (e.g. partner, family member)?	Can you redirect clients to them?
Who is requesting online delivery, and for what reasons?	How do you determine whether online engagement increases or decreases safety for the victim/survivor?	What minimum level of digital literacy is required for participants, and do you have the capacity to support this (e.g. by offering a pre-course or preparatory session)?	In what ways can these services support your work? (e.g. offering a spot to login from, providing risk updates, intervening in emergencies, etc.)
How do their reasons align with safety, accountability, and programme goals?	What participation rules are in place, and how will they be consistently enforced throughout the programme?		What are the protocols for information sharing, risk alerts, and coordinated responses in online cases?
How would online delivery affect victims/survivors, and what potential consequences might it have for their safety and wellbeing?	What sanctions or consequences are defined if participants fail to comply with these rules?		

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During programme

Privacy, Safety, and Client Presence	Risk and Partner Safety	Technical Failures	Group Dynamics, Facilitation Skills	Staff support, ethical practice
How do you verify the client is alone and not being interrupted, watched, or overheard?	How do you check a partner's safety after sessions, especially when strong emotions are triggered?	How do you respond to technical failures, sudden disconnections, or clients leaving abruptly?	Can group cohesion, peer accountability, and challenge be effectively maintained online?	Is regular supervision, case management available for staff to address difficulties, concerns and reduce isolation?
How do you notice avoidance, defensiveness, or sudden changes in engagement that may signal increased risk at home?	How do you assess for any new risk signals emerging from victim-support reports, police data, or child protection updates?	Is the platform functioning reliably during sessions?	Are group members disrupting or influencing others off-screen (e.g., through private chats)?	How often are facilitators debriefing high-risk sessions?
What behavioural cues (eye movements, tone, camera manipulation, sudden muting) may signal risk, dishonesty, or manipulation?	What system ensures that any concerns are passed immediately to victim support, police, or safeguarding agencies?	Are you documenting and analysing recurring digital problems?	Are facilitators confident in managing online group conflict and maintaining psychological safety?	Is there space to discuss ethical dilemmas particular to online work (e.g., boundaries, visibility, duty of care)?
Does the client's digital behaviour during the programme reflect patterns of control (records, screenshots, demands)?			How to train, support facilitators to detect and manage conflict, minimisation, denial, and manipulation in online group and individual sessions?	

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At the end/follow-up

Programme effectiveness	Post-programme support, Risk management	Victim safety
How do you assess programme effectiveness and identify meaningful shifts in behavior?	What ongoing support structures does the client need to remain non-abusive after the programme?	How can you support partner/survivor safety after programme completion?
Do you collect feedback from partners/survivors to assess change?	Do you have clear follow-up procedures to detect relapse, escalation, or renewed contact abuse?	What procedures ensure that partner/survivor input continues to inform risk assessments even after programme exit?
What indicators or evidence do you use to distinguish genuine change from superficial compliance?	What mechanisms are in place to ensure continuity of accountability (referrals, check-ins, community supports)?	
How do you incorporate multiagency information (police, probation, child protection) into end-of-programme assessments?		

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Structural

Quality Improvement	Staff Skills	Safety and risk assessment	Multiagency Collaboration	Data
What challenges emerged uniquely from online delivery?	What new staff competencies were needed (digital literacy, online risk detection, de-escalation)?	How does online intervention affect victim's safety?	What additional resources or partnerships would strengthen safety and accountability?	What data gaps remain, and how can you address them (tech usage, safety outcomes, engagement patterns)?
What worked well in online delivery, and what increased risk?	Is hybrid or online delivery sustainable with the current staffing, supervision, and technology infrastructure?	How do you adapt risk assessment and risk management for fully remote or hybrid models?	How can you obtain consistent, timely communication with partner agencies (victim support, police, probation, child protection)?	How do you ethically collect and store online programme data to protect privacy and support evaluation?
What needs to be done differently next time to increase engagement, accountability, and safety?		What information do you receive from victims, victim-support services or other multiagency partners about potential risks and safety measures?		
What ethical dilemmas arose (privacy, boundaries, risk), and how were they resolved?		What mechanisms ensure that this information directly informs ongoing risk assessment and programme decisions?		
How do you document and integrate lessons learned into improved policies, training, or risk protocols?				

Appendix 1.

WWP EN Mapping - Uncertain Paths: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Safety of Digital Perpetrator Work

Table 1. Proposal of Guiding Questions to Assess Digital Risks with Clients[1]

[1] Note: The questions included in this document were developed as part of a mapping exercise on online perpetrator programs (PPs), based on interviews with professionals delivering such interventions. This list is not exhaustive; it is intended as a starting point to help identify and assess risks that are specific to, or more prominent in, online program delivery.

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At the programme start

Living situation & environment	Devices, digital privacy, and boundaries	Patterns of digital surveillance or harm	Motivation & expectations
Do you currently live with your (ex-)partner, including the partner toward whom you were abusive?	Do you share devices, passwords, or online accounts with your (ex-)partner?	Have you ever checked your partner's messages, social media, or GPS location without permission? – What did you do with that information?	What motivates you to join the programme, and what are you hoping to achieve?
From where will you typically join the sessions?	How do you decide what is private and what is shared?	Have you used digital channels to monitor, intimidate, embarrass, or threaten your partner?	What do you expect from online sessions specifically (e.g., convenience, anonymity, reduced confrontation)?
Is anyone usually nearby when you log in?	What happens when one of you needs more privacy than the other?	Have you posted anything about her that caused distress, fear, or conflict?	Are there concerns you have about joining online rather than in person?
Do you have access to a private, uninterrupted space? Could anyone overhear you, see your screen, or influence what you say?	Do you have or seek access to your partner's phone, email, cloud storage, social media, or location services? How do you typically use that access?	What would respectful, non-controlling online communication look like for you?	
	How would you feel if your partner used the same monitoring or access strategies toward you?		

During programme

Post-session reactions & regulation	Environment & proximity to partner	Programme engagement
How do you usually feel immediately after a session—relieved, unsettled, defensive, motivated, angry, confused?	Who is usually around you right after a session?	What helps you stay present, honest, and reflective during online sessions?
What do you typically do after sessions, especially if you feel upset or overwhelmed?	Is your (ex-)partner ever present or nearby in those moments?	What makes it harder? (e.g., distractions, home environment, technology, avoidance)
What coping strategies help you manage intense or frustrating emotions?	How do you interact with her right after sessions when emotions might be heightened?	Have you ever felt the urge to disconnect or avoid difficult topics? What helped you stay engaged?
Who can you turn to after a session if you need support?	Could session content increase tension at home, and how might that risk be managed?	

At the end/follow-up

Applying learning	Support networks	Digital behaviour going forward
What will help you put the skills and alternative behaviours into practice after the programme ends?	Who can you contact if you feel at risk of behaving abusively?	How will you maintain healthy digital boundaries with your current or future partner?
What supports your ability to remain non-abusive in relationships?	What sources of accountability can you rely on (friends, peers, mentors, ongoing sessions, helplines)?	What commitments are you willing to make regarding digital respect, privacy, and communication?
Which high-risk situations or triggers do you anticipate?	What ongoing support might you need to maintain change?	How will you manage online triggers—such as social media, messaging patterns, or jealousy-inducing situations?
What strategies will you use to handle moments of stress, jealousy, frustration, or conflict?		