

Website accessibility

Web accessibility is a much discussed topic at the moment. This is partly because since part III of the Disability Discrimination Act came into force in 2004, service providers are having to consider making reasonable adjustments to the way they deliver their services. This is so that everyone, including disabled people, can use them. Creating an 'accessible website' addresses this concern directly, as websites are a service that organisations offer. It also ensures that your site takes into account the many and ever expanding ways all people access websites, be it through an assistive device or even a mobile phone.

This briefing takes a look at the different groups of users and technologies you will need to consider, and offers guidelines and tips to help you create an accessible website.

Even simple changes make a difference

There are many positive sides to making your website more accessible. An accessible site will enable more people to access your information and services and thus increase your audience. It will also make your site more 'usable'. In this way a visitor's experience of using your site will be much improved. This will reflect back positively on your organisation and improve their perception of you.

The first important step is to be honest about what your limitations are and what you can and cannot achieve. You won't be able to do everything at once – making a website accessible takes time, patience and effort. However, there is no excuse for not doing anything. Even on the smallest of budgets, something that will make a difference can be done.

Nevertheless, providing the same level of experience to anyone who visits your site should remain your top priority, and over time, this can be achieved. Get to understand your users. Try out as many different methods as possible to test to site. This will help you understand your users' needs, remove barriers and make as many corrections as possible.

Why be accessible?

At the moment, there is no legislation specifically dealing with web accessibility. There is however a set of guidelines for website developers, content authors and users called Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), set up by the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C). These documents contain very important points which have been commonly agreed ought to be adopted as good practice. Version 1.0 was published in 1999 and version 2.0 is currently in draft form. Version 2.0 promises to be easier to understand by non-technical people as well as easier to check web sites against using automated tests.

How accessible? Priority levels:

According to the WCAG, there are three different levels of priority for conformity to the accessibility guidelines: Priority 1,2 and 3.

Priority 1: Your site must at least conform to this level, as satisfying all the requirements is basic, and if you do not, one or more groups will not be able to access your site.

Priority 2: Your site should meet these requirements, although it is only recommended. Satisfying this priority would remove significant barriers to access.

Priority 3: Satisfying this checkpoint would indicate that you have done everything to address accessibility to your site.

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Future requirements

Simply because website accessibility is not yet law, does not mean that it will not become part of a legal framework. The DRC (Disability Rights Commission) undertook research and published a report in 2004 concluding that “most websites are inaccessible to many disabled people and fail to satisfy even the most basic standards for accessibility recommended by the World Wide Web Consortium”¹. Many predict that it is just a matter of time before the WCAG is taken as part of legislation.

Who for?

There is a range of different types of users who have accessibility issues, some of which (though not all) use assistive or alternative technologies when accessing the web. The main concept to remember when addressing the issues these users have is flexibility – making your content available in as many ways, to as many users, as possible. Below are some examples of users who have limited access to web sites.

a) those with impairments:

- visual: Those who are blind, have low vision or colour deficiency
- mobility or dexterity: Parkinson’s disease, Arthritis, Cerebral palsy, etc.
- cognitive: Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson’s Disease, Older age, etc.
- learning difficulties: Attention Deficit Disorder, dyslexia, non-verbal learning difficulties, English as a Second Language (ESL) users, reading and writing skills, etc.
- hearing

b) Another group of user are those, disabled or not, who cannot access a web site because they are unable to understand the textual

content of the page. These people are described as having **limited textual comprehension** of the web site.

- learning or cognitive impaired
- children who do not read at adult level
- adult non-readers or limited readers
- ESL readers
- Someone who is unfamiliar with the context trying to understand a specialised web site

What are assistive technologies?

These are **input** or **output** devices that help people with an impairment access websites. The type of device reflects the issues and problems that people with impairments encounter when accessing the web (i.e. either input issues/problems or output issues/problems). Note however that assistive technologies do little, or nothing, to help people with cognitive impairments or learning difficulties.

Input devices are used mainly to overcome mobility/dexterity impairments.

- Oversized trackball/joystick – (disadvantage: difficult when lots of scrolling is required)
- Adapted/virtual keyboard
- Mouth stick
- Head wands
- Switches
- Sip and puff switches
- Eye tracking devices
- Voice recognition software

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Output devices are used mainly to overcome visual impairments.

- Speech readers NOTE: screen reading software packages are a wonderful aid but are very difficult to learn and people spend a long time learning to use one package. Once they have learnt that specific package, they will not want to learn another one.
- Screen magnifiers
- Refreshable Braille displays
- WAT- voice browser add-on to Explorer. Primarily targeted to the elderly, advertised through seniornet
- Lynx – text only browser that is purely keyboard, can plug Braille refreshable screen reader into it

So, how do we start?

Whether you are starting out with a new website or a building a new version of one you already have, it might be easiest to ensure that accessibility is adopted into your brief from the start. This will be the lowest maintenance, least time-consuming and lowest cost option, as things will be integrated into both the process and the system from the beginning. Adding things on later often leads to technical and site management problems, and can get expensive.

However, if you do already have a site up and running and want to make it more accessible, you can run a test to see how accessible it already is. There are several free services available online, the most known one being Bobby at www.cast.org/bobby/. This will give you an indication of some of the accessibility problems you might need to resolve.

Note: Bobby results can be overwhelming since the test picks up everything, and some of the detailed notes can be rather technical. To help with weeding out the information that you

most need to consider we've compiled some helpful tips and issues to guide you when working towards a more accessible website.

Issues to consider

It is important to recognise that the majority of users who suffer from an impairment often suffer from more than one (e.g. partial sight and diminished motor skills). Unfortunately, when you do something on your website to help alleviate one impairment or support one group, you may often hinder another. A few good tips to minimise doing this are:

- Make the navigation throughout your site consistent (i.e. keep the same menu bars on all pages). This is vital and will greatly increase both your site's accessibility and usability.
- Try to limit scroll the down length of your page. Keep it to maximum 3 screen lengths.
- Beware of using too many links, and always keep them as straight forward as possible. Use the same colour ie blue is the standard. Avoid indicating them by saying "click here" as this is bad practice and creates device dependence (see: hints in design). Links should be meaningful enough to make sense when read out of context as some screen readers and other software will scan for links, or some users will tab from link to link. If all your links say, "click here" or "read more here", and nothing about the information they lead to, people may never access them. So, for example, instead of using: "for more information about ONE, [click here](#)" simply write, "[ONE information](#)".
- People who depend on speech readers have to be able to imagine what your page looks like and get a feel for it as the contents are read to them. They need to be able to scan your page easily to get the gist of the

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content, so try to keep the site clean and simple to make this easier.

- Avoid wordy, text rich, verbose pages. Use sharp editing skills and avoid unnecessary text. Check your spelling.
- Screen magnifiers (as well as human eyes) have great difficulty with small text. Avoid using it at all times unless absolutely necessary.
- Don't assume that because you've made a special formatting feature possible, that people will know how to use it. Always label and explain your features succinctly and clearly.

Does this mean we compromise our design?

No! One of the most common misconceptions is that design needs to be compromised in order for a site to be accessible. This is false. As long as your site has provided for the assistive and alternative technologies that may be accessing the site, design can remain the main focus of the site.

Besides, the majority of users with accessibility issues will be accessing your site using an adapted standard browser. These devices are programmed to ignore the design and pull out the content or information it is told to. The browser will be adapted to suit their needs and preferences (e.g. large font, ignore images, ignore media, ignore images and media, etc.).

NOTE: If images and multimedia are turned off and all your content is images, no content will get through to your user.

Hints for good design:

- **Device independence** – This means providing content in as many ways as possible so that different devices can access the information in different ways. Have a design which is flexible and allows users to

change the colours and backgrounds. Style sheets can be very useful for this purpose.

- **“alt” tag it!** An “alt” tag is “alternative” text to an image on your site. These alternative messages are most important to users who are unable to view or access the images on your site. And by simply providing an appropriate “alt” tag to each image (i.e. Doing it Ourselves – cover pic) will help your site be more accessible. The person visiting will be able to view it with a variety of devices.
- **Use clear headings.** Use good, clear 1st and 2nd tier headings and text highlights and summaries where possible. People using screen readers (and other devices) will often skim a page, for headings and if they don't find anything they like, will move onto the next page...
- **Make it chunky.** Break text into concise, manageable chunks. Not only will this make your site more accessible, but it will increase the usability as well.
- **Know your audience**, and how to write for them. Think of your users and do everything with them in mind.
- **Limit graphics** and use only when appropriate. Too many graphics can cause problems for the majority of users.
- **Use PDFs sparingly.** PDFs cause serious accessibility issues when transferred from a word document, unless properly laid out and well-structured. **note:** Apparently, the new addition of Adobe Reader (version 7) addresses these issues, and improves this process.
- **Tags please.** Title tags, label tags and abbreviation tags are simple to do and help your site's accessibility. Title tags provide further information about links, abbreviation tags provide the full details of the abbreviated word (i.e. BBC, req'd) and label

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tags improve accessibility if you are using a form or checkboxes (the user does not have to put a check in the box, but can choose anywhere within the label).

Text only option?

Designers and developers often suggest that by offering a text only option to their site they are doing enough to satisfy accessibility demands. However, W3C states that a text only option should only be your last resort as it can lead to maintaining two different sites. With little not very difficult work (i.e. adding "alt" tags, etc.) you can make your own site more accessible and more user friendly and not have to resort to second rate solutions.

Making your site more accessible means you increase your chances of more visitors and people using your services. Who wouldn't want that?

Further information

Bobby: www.cast.org/bobby/

Disability Rights Commission: www.drc-gb.org/
Disability Discrimination Act -

www.disability.gov.uk/dda/#part3

DRC Report: [www.drc-gb.org/
publicationsandreports/report.asp](http://www.drc-gb.org/publicationsandreports/report.asp)

W3C: www.w3c.org

Webcredible Handbook resource for user-friendly website development information on Accessibility and Discrimination: [http://
www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/
web-accessibility/uk-website-legal-
requirements.shtml](http://www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/web-accessibility/uk-website-legal-requirements.shtml)

Other Related Information Sheets

Legislation
Writing for the Web

¹ *The Web, Access and Inclusion for Disabled People: A formal investigation conducted by the DRC*, Introduction, p. V, by Bert Massie, Chairman, April 2004.

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