01. Accessibility overview

What are the rules?

The Web Accessibility Directive (Directive (EU) 2016/2102) sets out rules on making public sector websites and mobile apps accessible to everyone, including people with disabilities.

Although the Directive does not directly apply to EU institutions, all European Commission websites and apps are encouraged to follow these rules.

WCAG 2.1, level AA is the recommended standard.

How to comply?

To comply with the Directive's rules, you need to:

- meet the WCAG 2.1, level AA standard
- write and publish an online accessibility statement
- help users contact you to report an accessibility problem or ask for content in an accessible format.

See also the accessibility checklist for tips on making accessible content.

There are different deadlines for doing this, depending on whether you have a site or an app, and when it was published.

About accessibility

Accessibility means making sure that your site, tool, or app can be used by people with the widest range of capabilities.

Creating content in line with the latest accessibility standards means that all users – regardless of the device or software they are using and the environment they are working in – can use the information, services and tools we provide. Our content should be compatible with current and future browsers, devices, software and assistive technologies, ensuring we do not exclude anyone who needs to access it.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which has been signed by the European Union, persons with disabilities include those who have 'long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others'.

Users can experience problems when using the web because of different kinds of disabilities, functional limitations, environmental factors or technology-related issues, such as:

- visual, auditory, physical, cognitive disabilities
- low computer literacy
- technology-related limitations or incompatibilities: browsers, platforms, devices, mobile web
- environmental factors: place, lighting, noise, slow internet connection

Why is it important?

As a public sector organisation, we have a duty to ensure that we do not exclude people from accessing our content. This includes the estimated 80 million people in the EU who have a disability, which may make it harder to access information that does not meet the latest standards.

We should not make it hard – or even impossible – for people to learn about who we are and what we do, and to access the information and tools they need.

Part of that work involves ensuring we meet the current standards for our products and content, including those in the Web Accessibility Directive.

Accessibility is not just about helping people with disabilities. **All users** benefit from well-structured, clearly written, standards-compliant content, regardless of their physical and mental abilities and their familiarity with technology.

The added benefit is that accessible content is more easily found in search engines like Google, which promote well-written, properly structured content.

Meeting WCAG 2.1 (AA)

These resources may help you apply WCAG 2.1 (AA):

- Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Overview
- Understanding WCAG 2.1
- Techniques for WCAG 2.1

Exceptions

The Directive does not apply to the following websites and mobile apps (see Article 1):

- **office file formats** published **before 23 September 2018** (unless needed for active administrative processes relating to the tasks performed by the organisation)
- **pre-recorded video or audio** or other 'time-based media' published **before 23 September 2020**
- **live video or audio** or other time-based media
- **online maps**, as long as key information is provided in an accessible digital way for maps for navigational use
- **third-party content** that is not funded or developed by, or under the control of, the organisation concerned
- **reproductions of items in heritage collections** that cannot be made fully accessible
- **extranets and intranets** – websites that are only available for a closed group of people and not the general public, published before 23 September 2019, until they undergo a substantial revamp
- **archives** – sites and apps that contain only content that is not needed for active administrative processes and not edited or updated **after 23 September 2019**

Writing an accessibility statement

Under the Web Accessibility Directive, EU public sector websites should have an accessibility statement.

Typically, this statement:

- explains which accessibility standards you comply with
- lists any improvements you have made
- lists any content that is not accessible and why
- is written in simple, non-technical language
- tells users how they can contact you to report accessibility problems, or ask for information in an accessible format

You may find the following resources helpful:

Model accessibility statement – European Commission – sample statement from Implementing Decision (EU) 2016/1523

Accessibility statement generator tool – W3C

Usually, to write this statement, you would need to carry out an accessibility audit of your site. You should ask an accessibility expert to help you with this.

If that is not possible, there are some basic accessibility checks you can do yourself.

For the Commission's website, DG Communication is responsible for creating and publishing the statement.

Documents

It is best to create your content as HTML webpages. But if you do need to upload documents, make sure they are **accessible**.

Structure your documents correctly (using headings and styles).

You can convert your files to PDF using the Commission's Document e-Services. If you send a properly structured Word file to this service, it will automatically email you back an **accessible PDF version**.

Avoid creating content in document form only.

Tools

You can use automatic accessibility checkers to help check your site or tool meets the required standards. But you should never rely on tools alone. They're just the start. Think of them like running the spelling checker in Word.

Manual checking (by a human) and using assistive technology (e.g. screen readers) is also essential.

Some points to bear in mind:

- at best, tools find 10-30% of the errors on a page
- just because a tool finds errors, does not mean they are all 'true' accessibility barriers
- some tools give 'false positives' or 'tool errors'
- not all errors can be detected by tools
- just because a tool says a website is accessible, does not mean that it is
- typically, tools can only check 15-20% of the WCAG success criteria
- some checks are only partial (e.g. they can check there is an alt attribute, not if it is the right one)
- different tools are aimed at different target audiences (e.g. designers, developers)
- you may need to run two or more tools to get the best results

You may find the following links helpful:

- What automatic tools can and cannot do – W3C
- What we found when we tested tools on the world's least accessible web page – GOV.UK
- Building the most inaccessible site possible with a perfect Lighthouse score - blog post, Manuel Matuzovic

While DG Communication cannot endorse any **specific products** or software, here are some tools you may like to try:

- Color Contrast Analyzer

- Lighthouse
- Koa11y
- BOSA Accessibility Check
- WAVE
- NoCoffee Vision Simulator
- HTML_CodeSniffer

Background

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines were produced by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) as part of the web accessibility initiative.

They are intended for all web content providers and developers (including writers, developers and designers).

Accessible content should meet the **4 principles of web accessibility** (the 'POUR' principles):

1. **Perceivable** – your content should be available to at least one of the user's senses. For example, is a transcript of audio-only content available for deaf users?
2. **Operable** – make sure your content can be controlled by a variety of tools. For example, using the keyboard only, for people who are not able to use a mouse.
3. **Understandable** – use clear and simple language and predictable and consistent interfaces. This helps people with cognitive or reading disabilities.
4. **Robust** – your website or app should work well across different platforms, browsers and devices, including assistive technology.

Laws and standards

Directive (EU) 2016/2102 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies (the 'Web Accessibility Directive') came into force in 2016.

All EU institutions should comply:

'*Although this Directive does not apply to the websites and mobile applications of Union institutions, those institutions are encouraged to comply with the accessibility requirements set out in this Directive.*'

The Directive requires that public sector organisations apply European standard EN 301 549 V2.1.2 (201808) to their websites and online tools. This standard is based on the latest version of the guidelines, WCAG 2.1, conformance level AA.

Learn more

Watch this video of a presentation on digital accessibility (EU Login required) given by Tanja Kleut, an expert on accessibility from the European Parliament, to find out more about accessibility standards and best practice.

Contact and support

Need further assistance on this topic? Please contact the team in charge of Europa Domain Management (EU Login required)