

# Ecommunication and accessibility

## What is ecommunication?

The transmission of information by electronic means. For example via:

- a website
- a portable document file (pdf)
- a Word document
- email

More and more organisations communicate with service users and the general public via electronic means. This could include:

- emails and ebulletins
- a website to:
  - download electronic versions of documents
  - make an enquiry by filling out electronic forms
  - take part in an online survey
  - join an interactive forum

Many people with communication support needs benefit from information presented electronically because they can:

- change the font size
- use symbol software to add their preferred symbol system to whichever parts of the text they need help decoding
- use screen reader software to read text out loud
- import sections into their personal communication systems to refer to later

But remember, not everyone has access to ecommunications.

All ecommunication methods must meet the current standards for accessibility.

The easiest way to ensure that your ecommunication methods are accessible is to design them with accessibility in mind. It's much easier to build in basic tips to ensure accessibility when you are developing your website, document or email.

Some basic tips include:

## **Making Word documents accessible**

- If using Arial font, use point 12 as a minimum. Point 14 is preferable.
- If using any other font, find a point size equal in size to Arial 12 or 14, for example Verdana point 11 or 13.
- Don't use italics.
- Create clear uncluttered pages, with plenty of white space. Use bulleted lists when appropriate as they can be easier to understand than long paragraphs.
- Structure your documents using Styles. For example use the Heading style to create headings rather than just making text look like a heading by making it bold.
- Use Styles to create blank space around paragraphs rather than using carriage returns.
- Avoid animated or flashing/blinking text.
- Ensure there is good contrast between elements on the page, for example text and background colours.
- Provide alternative labels for all images. To do this, right-click on the image, then select Format Picture. A dialogue box will appear. Select the Web tab and then add the appropriate alternative text.
- Use the built-in table tools when creating columns of text. Don't use tabs.
- Complete the 'Summary' information in the 'Properties' section of your document. This is information makes it more efficient for search engines to identify and find your document.
- Keep a plain text version of documents for braille transcription and screen readers.
- The text used for Hyperlinks should be specific, for example, "SAIF's website" rather than "Click here".

## **Converting Word documents into accessible PDFs (Portable Document Formats)**

- Use an accessible Word document as your source document.
- Use Adobe Acrobat Professional 8 (or above) or the built-in facility in Word 2007. Earlier versions or other PDF makers may not produce accessible documents.
- Ensure 'enable accessibility and reflow with tagged PDF' is checked in the document conversion settings.
- After conversion, use the Adobe Accessibility Checker to check for possible problems.
- If available, use a screen reader to check the reading order and to check that all the content is accessible.
- When posting PDFs on the web, add a link to Adobe Acrobat reader [www.adobe.com/uk/products/reader](http://www.adobe.com/uk/products/reader) and post an alternative version in Word or Plain Text. Ideally also provide the information as an HTML webpage.

## Good practice for emails

### General guidelines

- Use plain English in all emails. Avoid using jargon and explain abbreviations.
- Keep in mind that different email clients display emails differently.
- Always clearly state who the email is from and give your contact details.
- Include your Company Registration Number or Charity Number, if relevant, and an email Privacy Policy and Disclaimer.
- Keep your subject line of between 20 – 50 characters and avoid uppercase, multiple characters or signs for money (£, \$).
- Set the line length of your emails to a maximum of 65 characters.
- Use lowercase for links and avoid breaking them over 2 lines.

### Plain Text emails

- Plain Text emails are more accessible to assistive technology.
- The layout will not change when opened by the recipient.
- Plain Text emails will only accept 'safe' characters, i.e. letters, numbers, common punctuation marks.
- Web addresses (URLs) should be written in full, i.e. <http://www...>

### HTML emails

- HTML emails can be more visually attractive than plain text emails. However, they may not be displayed in the same way in the recipient's mailbox.
- They should comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) version 1.0 AA or the WCAG 2 equivalent.

## Group emails and newsletters

- If using an Address Book or Contact List, use the BCC field (an email copy whose recipients do not know the identity of other recipients).
- A Plain Text Newsletter is usually easier to read by assistive technology than an HTML version. However, some people prefer to read a visually attractive HTML Newsletter or the same content on a webpage.
- For Plain Text Newsletters, use the Text Email Newsletter (TEN) Standards – see [www.headstar.com/ten](http://www.headstar.com/ten)
- For HTML Newsletters use the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) version 1.0 AA or the WCAG 2 equivalent – see [www.w3.org/WAI](http://www.w3.org/WAI) (Web Accessibility Initiative)
- If you use HTML, offer a Plain Text version as well.
- Do not send Newsletters to people who have not requested them.
- Always offer your recipients an opportunity to opt out.
- Include a link to a webpage with the same content as the HTML Newsletter.

## Making websites accessible

- Comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) version 1.0 AA or the WCAG 2 equivalent. Find out more at [www.w3.org/WAI](http://www.w3.org/WAI) (Web Accessibility Initiative).
- When tendering for a website ensure that accessibility is built-in from the start. SAIF (Scottish Accessible Information Forum) recommends WCAG AA compliance as a minimum. Use “The guide to good practice in commissioning accessible websites” developed by the Disability Rights Commission and the British Standards Institute. It is also known as PAS78: 2006. [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com) (Search: Web Accessibility).
- Create a website design that is flexible so that users can change colours, font and font size to meet their individual requirements.
- Give links a meaningful name describing what they link to, e.g. “SAIF’s Publication Page”. Do not use “Link to”.
- Add alternative text labels to all non-text elements, like photographs and graphics.
- Do regular accessibility checks on your site using the automated tools provided by the Worldwide Web Consortium (W3C) [www.W3.org](http://www.W3.org)
- Involve disabled people in the planning and testing of your site.
- Get regular and organised feedback from disabled people about the accessibility and usability of your site.

For more information contact:

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