

e-Communication and accessibility

What is e-communication?

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 e-bulletins
- 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

All e-communication methods must meet the current standards for accessibility.

The easiest way to ensure that your e-communication 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

- Avoid using small fonts and setting large blocks of text in italics
- Use styles to add structure to your documents. For example use the heading style to create headings rather than just making text look like a heading by making it bold.
- 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.
- Create clear uncluttered pages, with plenty of white space. Use bulleted lists when appropriate as they can be easier to understand than long paragraphs.

- Avoid animated or flashing/blinking text.
- Ensure there is good contrast between elements on the page, e.g. text and background colours.
- Use the built-in table tools when creating columns of text. Don't use tabs to create tables.
- Use descriptive link text for links, when linking to web pages within your documents.
- Add space around paragraphs using style formatting options rather than using carriage returns. This is particularly important if you intend to convert your Word documents into PDF files.

Converting your Word document to a portable document file (PDF)

- Format the source document using styles (strip out double returns and don't use tabs or spaces to create tables).
- Add appropriate labels to all images.
- Avoid complex layouts with overlapping elements.
- Use the latest version of Adobe Acrobat to convert documents to PDF.
- Ensure 'enable accessibility and reflow with tagged PDF' is checked in the document conversion settings. More information about settings for creating accessible PDFs can be found in the Adobe accessibility authoring guidelines (for example, check for security settings, fonts and book marking), at: www.adobe.com/accessibility/index.html.
- After conversion, use the in-built Accessibility Checker to check for possible problems. If you have one, use a screen reader to check the reading order and to check that all the content is accessible.
- Complete the 'Summary' information in the 'Properties' section of your document. By providing information (for example, the title, author, subject and key words) which describes your document you will make it easier for others to search and find your document.

- When posting PDFs on the web, add a link to Adobe Acrobat reader and a link to the online conversion tools:
www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/access_onlinetools.html.

Sending emails to individuals

Use plain English in all emails. Avoid using jargon and explain abbreviations.

Keep in mind that different email clients display emails differently.

Use plain text emails to ensure the information is displayed to the recipients in the way you intend.

Use plain text emails for maximum accessibility, especially for people using screen readers.

If you use HTML emails, follow the same accessibility guidelines as for web pages (WCAG 1.0 guidelines, priority II).

For plain text emails, use the Text Email Newsletter (TEN) Standard – see www.headstar.com/ten.

Sending emails to groups

Always clearly state who the email is from and your contact details.

Protect your recipients' privacy: use the Bcc field for mailing addresses.

If you use HTML emails, offer a plain text version as well, either:

- let the recipient choose which version to subscribe to or
- send everyone the plain text with the HTML version attached.

Do not send the email to people who have not requested it.

Always offer your recipients an opportunity to opt out.

Making websites accessible

Comply with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines version 1.0 (WCAG). Find out more at 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.

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.

Add labels to all non-text elements, like photographs and graphics.

Do regular accessibility checks on your site, e.g. run it through the Cynthia Says accessibility checker at www.cynthiasays.com

Involve disabled people in the planning and testing of your site.

Get regular and organised feedback from disabled people about the accessibility of your site.

Provide your staff with disability equality training. A key barrier for disabled people is negative attitudes towards them.

For more information contact:
The Scottish Accessible Information Forum (SAIF)
Scottish Consumer Council
Royal Exchange House
100 Queen Street
Glasgow G1 3DN

Email: info@saifscotland.org.uk Website: www.saifscotland.org.uk