An introduction to online accessibility

26/03/2026

See all updates

This digital guide is designed to help heritage organisations make their online content accessible to all.

Introduction

There are over 16 million disabled people in the UK – about one in four of the population.

The social model of disability, explained by disability charity Scope, shows how people are disabled by barriers in society. We tackle physical barriers with ramps and grab bars, and negative attitudes with education and empathy. An inaccessible website is a digital barrier.

There are laws preventing discrimination against people with disabilities. Every step towards improving accessibility, no matter how small, helps to share heritage with people who would otherwise be excluded.

This guidance is designed to support you in meeting the Heritage Fund's digital accessibility requirements for your project. We want to create digital heritage resources that can be enjoyed by as many people as possible.

Guiding principles

Online accessibility is about people

Online accessibility is about making sure people with disabilities can access your digital content. We can do this by:

- making content easy to read
- keeping interactions simple
- offering multiple ways of doing things

Accessibility is a responsibility shared by everyone involved with creating and publishing digital content. Decisions and actions at any point can have an impact, for better or worse.

People access digital content in different ways

People with different disabilities, or even the same disability, will face different barriers. Sometimes, the solution to one person's access will present a challenge to someone else.

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), an international organisation that develops web standards, have written about how people with disabilities use the web in different ways. Understanding potential barriers means we can plan how to mitigate them.

Accessibility is a journey of progression, not perfection. Aim for sensible compromises to support as many people as possible.

What are my project's digital accessibility responsibilities?

Inclusion, access and participation is one of four investment principles guiding the Heritage Fund's grant decision making. This principle recognises the role digital technology plays in making heritage more accessible and enjoyable, and enabling projects to increase their impact and reach.

If you receive a grant from the Heritage Fund, you must adhere to recognised accessibility standards so that as many people as possible can access your digital outputs:

- grants from £10,000 and £250,000 – websites and website content must meet at least W3C Level A (Single A) accessibility standard
- grants over £250,000 – websites and website content must meet at least W3C Level AA (Double A) accessibility standard

W3C accessibility standards

W3C creates and publishes the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), the international standard for web content accessibility.

There are 13 guidelines in WCAG, divided into individual requirements or 'success criteria'. Each one relates to a particular accessibility level: Level A, Level AA or Level AAA.

Websites meeting the Single A standard have a good baseline of accessibility, but will still include barriers for many disabled people. Websites meeting the Double A standard will be more accessible. The highest level is the Triple A standard, beyond the scope of this guide.

UK accessibility legislation

Disabled people have legal rights in access to goods, facilities and services. Accessibility legislation differs across the UK and depending on your organisation type.

In the UK the Equality Act 2010, and in Northern Ireland the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (DDA), state organisations must make 'reasonable adjustments' to make sure their services are accessible to disabled users. This includes digital access such as websites, apps and documents like PDFs.

The Scope for Business website provides information on UK law and digital accessibility. The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland explains the Northern Irish disability discrimination law (PDF).

The Public Sector Bodies Accessibility Regulations 2018 applies to the whole of the UK, and requires that public bodies – organisations that are owned, operated, or significantly funded by the government to deliver public services – meet the WCAG 2.2 Level AA accessibility standard and publish an accessibility statement for their website or mobile app.

The best way to keep ahead of accessibility legislation is to make your digital content accessible, meeting WCAG 2.2 Level AA. The law contains exceptions where this creates a disproportionate burden on an organisation, but you are expected to have assessed your needs by conducting an accessibility assessment.

All websites should provide reasonable adjustments, such as alt text for images. This guide covers many of the important accessibility basics.

Planning for digital accessibility

Identifying accessibility issues from the outset will save time and ensure you have included any relevant costs in your application.

Choosing a DIY website platform

Your project might need to build a low-cost, easy-to-manage website. Online tools such as WordPress, Wix and Squarespace offer pre-built themes. Be sure to include accessibility when searching for themes. You can search WordPress themes using the 'accessibility-ready' tag. Themes labelled as accessible do not guarantee accessibility.

You could check a demo page using the tools and methods in the checking web pages section, if you are comfortable doing so. This will help you avoid themes with these common problems:

- text on top of an image or video background
- slide carousels or background videos that can’t be stopped
- popups that hide content and cannot be dismissed by a keyboard user
- social media feeds a keyboard user cannot skip

Web page accessibility also depends on the content you add. Check your web pages whenever you add or edit content.

Checklist for third-party suppliers

You are responsible for the accessibility of any website or digital content you commission. Unfortunately, not all off-the-shelf solutions are accessible.

Do your research before committing to a product or service from an external supplier. You should consider:

- Can they meet WCAG 2.2 at level A or AA?
- Do they have a testing strategy? Does it include people who use assistive technology?
- Do they have an accessibility roadmap?
- Do they offer training and support for content editors?

AbilityNet has a great accessibility procurement checklist you can work through if you are commissioning digital services or sites.

Exercise caution with accessibility overlays

An accessibility overlay (sometimes called an accessibility plugin, widget or toolbar) is a piece of third-party software added to a website using a piece of code and designed to instantly improve accessibility for people with disabilities.

Be wary of any software claiming to automatically fix accessibility issues. The Scope for Business website highlights that accessibility overlays do not improve site accessibility. They may cause issues for people using assistive technologies, and will not make you compliant with WCAG or accessibility regulations.

Working with volunteers

Share this guide with volunteers involved with creating digital content, especially the sections on good content practice and how to check digital accessibility. If they are new to accessibility, consider how best to support them – with time and practice accessibility will become a habit.

Good content practice

Working with text

A lot of digital content is text-based. If text can be copied and pasted, it can also be read aloud by text-to-speech, or screen reader, tools. Being able to listen to text helps people with low or no vision and neurodivergence engage with your content.

Text within images is inaccessible to screen readers. Avoid putting text in shapes and boxes in digital documents – this is also inaccessible.

Organise content with headings

Headings add structure to your content, and help sighted users to scan your page. They also allow people to navigate page content, either with the tools built into documents or web browsers, or with screen readers that can be used across different applications.

It's not enough to manually make text look bolder and larger – you need to use the heading tools in your website content management system (CMS) or document editing software.

You can adapt the default appearance of headings, but they must have good colour contrast.

Headings are numbered from 1 to 6. Only use one Heading 1 per document or page – this will normally be your title, and where screen readers will start from. Treat headings like Russian nesting dolls. Use Heading 2 for sections, Heading 3 for sub-sections, and so forth.

Keep headings in order; using Heading 4 after Heading 2 can be confusing. Editing tools should let you view the headings you apply, so you can check the order. Avoid empty headings, which can occur when text in a heading is deleted but the heading is not fully removed.

Use lists to break down larger blocks of text

A series of items or sequence of steps is easier to follow when presented as a list with bullet points or numbers.

Lists created by manually adding a dash, asterisk, number or image at the start of each line are not accessible. Lists must be properly formatted using the tools provided by your CMS or document editing software. That way, people using assistive technology can tell how many items a list contains, and which item they are on.

Text alignment can improve readability

Use left-aligned-text for left to right languages. Justified text is harder for some people to read due to the uneven spacing between words, so avoid this.

Limit centre-aligned-text to short lines only. Trying to find the start of the next line when there are many rows of centre-aligned-text is harder on our eyes and brain.

Plain language is easier to understand

Simple words and shorter sentences are easier to read. Avoid unnecessary jargon. If you must use specialist or technical terms, explain them when you first use them. Hemingway Editor has a free readability calculator you can use to check your content.

Good colour contrast is vital

Light text on a light background is hard to read for everyone. Make sure text has enough contrast with the background.

The rules for colour contrast depend on font size and if text is bold. There are also colour contrast rules for non-text items, such as button backgrounds. This UK Government blog post about colour contrast provides more details.

Be careful when using emojis

Emojis should be used sparingly, because they make content harder to understand for people using screen readers. This video of a screen reader reading text with emojis clearly demonstrates the potential barriers. Don't replace words with emojis – use them at the end of sentences – and be aware that the meaning of emojis may differ between age groups and communities, and can change over time.

Link text must be descriptive

Creating accessible links, explained here by Make Things Accessible, requires using meaningful and unique link text. When links are accessible, screen reader users can use them to navigate your content. You should:

- avoid using generic link text such as 'click here' or 'read more'
- avoid using website addresses as link text
- include the file type when linking to a downloadable document – put it at the end of the link text, in brackets
- Avoid making links open in new windows. If you can't avoid it, let people know it will happen – put it at the end of the link text, in brackets.

Example text for a link might be: **2026 Annual Report (PDF, opens in new window)**

Working with images

An image can complement your text, or it can be the main piece of content. It's important to describe meaningful images to people who can't otherwise see or understand them.

Your CMS or document editing software should provide an option for adding an alternative text description (alt text) when adding an image. Good alt text:

- is short and concise
- focuses on what people need to know without unnecessary details
- does not start with ‘Image of’ or ‘Link to’

For example, the alternative text for an antique vase might be: **porcelain vase with hand-painted blue floral patterns and gilded gold handles**.

The exact text you use will depend on how and why you are using an image. The alt text for a logo linking to another website should start with the logo text and end with ‘home page’ if that’s the page being linked to. W3C has an alt text decision tree to help you decide.

What to include in image captions

You may have the option to include a visible caption with an image. While alt text is used to describe the key aspects of a picture for people who can’t see it, caption text is used for additional details or related information that’s helpful for everyone:

- the editorial context: who, what, why, where and when
- citing the source of an image
- any copyright information, including open licence details

The alt text and caption text must not be the same. Continuing with our antique vase example, the caption might say: **18th century Dutch vase, British Museum, public domain image**.

How to describe infographics

An infographic is like a poster telling a story or explaining a topic, with short sentences, pictures, icons and charts. There is no upper limit on alt text, but using it to convey the full meaning isn’t the best experience for screen reader users. Use a short alt text description for the image and provide the full details within text on the page. Imperial College London has a good example on its accessible images page.

Describing complex diagrams and charts

Pennsylvania State University’s accessibility department has detailed guidance for:

- screen grabs for illustrating documentation
- graphs and charts
- flowcharts
- maps
- mathematical and scientific equations

Tables for data

Tables use a visual grid of horizontal rows and vertical columns to help explain relationships between pieces of data. They can also be helpful for presenting structured content. Tables must be formatted in a particular way to make sure they can be understood by people who cannot see the grid.

Introduce each table with a clear, descriptive heading. Use the tools provided in your CMS or document editing software to:

- add a caption or alternative text summarising the table contents
- identify the header row and/or column
- prevent rows from breaking across pages in documents

Screen readers read tables from left to right and top to bottom. Keep tables as simple as possible by not splitting or merging cells. Follow a ‘one cell, one item’ rule and don’t use line breaks. Avoid empty cells – use ‘no data’ or ‘not applicable’ instead.

Multimedia and interactive content

Some people prefer watching or listening to content to reading lots of text. A text alternative is still important for people with limited vision or hearing, but they are also good for people in noisy environments, or places that demand quiet.

Avoid making audio or video play automatically. This can be distracting and can cause physical discomfort (such as nausea, dizziness). If you can’t disable auto-playing make sure that people can pause playback as a minimum.

Planning for an accessible outcome

Whether you’re creating your own multimedia content, or considering a commission, check the planning audio and video media advice from W3C before recording. It will save you time and money.

Text alternatives for audiovisual content

Audio-only content needs a transcript, a text-version of the audio to allow D/deaf people to understand the content. Video content needs captions (also known as subtitles). Important visual information presented in the video, including onscreen text, must be described in a transcript. W3C offers guidance on making audio and video content accessible.

Many video tools offer automated captions. YouTube offers an automatic captioning tool. It’s important to check automatically generated captions for accuracy. You can manually edit YouTube captions if needed.

Interactive content

You might want to add an interactive quiz, game or immersive video map to your website. Unless it has been designed to be accessible, for example, supporting keyboard access, it’s likely some people won’t be able to interact with your content.

Rather than avoiding such content, you can help screen reader users bypass it by adding a skip link, as explained on the Make Things Accessible website. Also think about providing content in alternative, accessible formats.

Forms

Your website probably has many online forms – for example to send an enquiry, to make a donation or book an event. Accessible forms are easier to complete and people are more likely to use them.

Each input field in a form must have a clear label. Labels help people using assistive technology know what details to enter, and when a field is required.

Don't rely on colour alone to indicate when there is a problem with a form. Adding a red border is not good enough for a person with low or no vision.

Forms can get very technical. WebAIM has written a guide to creating accessible forms. This may be an area where you would benefit from professional support.

Helpful tools for content editors

These free tools can help you spot problems with your content while editing your web pages – for example spotting images with missing alt text:

- Sa11y (supports WordPress, Joomla and any desktop browser)
- Editoria11y (supports WordPress, Drupal and Squarespace)

They can be installed in your CMS. Sa11y also has a bookmarklet tool that can be installed in any desktop web browser.

Social media

There are more social media platforms than ever. Some are more text-focused, others are geared towards images and video. Some platforms are more accessible to disabled people than others, so using more than one will help you reach more people.

Hashtags are often used on social media sites to tag and search for information. The RNIB has created a useful guide to accessible social media and recommends Camel Case for hashtags – for example **#MuseumSelfie** – since all lowercase letters are harder to read.

Webinars and presentations

Online events can be an accessible option for many people. Recording an event means that people can watch when, and how often, they like. You can read tips for hosting accessible and inclusive online events from the UK Government.

When considering different webinar platforms, check websites to see what accessibility features they include. If you can't find this, contact the providers and ask.

Ensure registration forms include questions about any specific accommodations people with disabilities would find helpful. Allow time to follow up requests for additional support. Complex requirements may fall outside your skillset, available tools and budget. People generally appreciate it when you respond to them, and discussions can help identify helpful compromises.

Share your slides before the webinar, if you can. This helps people with low or no vision and neurodivergence follow along more easily. People can still refer to their local copy if the internet connection is unstable.

How to check digital accessibility

You won't be able to make effective improvements or write an accurate website accessibility statement without understanding how accessible your website is. Start with automated accessibility tests. Although they can't find everything, they are quick to run and good at catching the most common and basic issues. Fixing these will make a real difference to people.

Some useful free tools are mentioned below. If you're not familiar with using them, you may not fully understand the test results and how to fix things and may need expert support. Prioritise what does make sense and is within your control, such as adding image alt text.

Checking web pages

If you have a large website, you won't need to check every page. Choose a sample representing the different types of content, page layout and interactivity on your site:

- essential pages (such as contact page, booking forms, your accessibility statement)
- most visited pages (such as home page, prominent content pages)
- pages with video/audio content and interactive features
- image-heavy pages (such as photo galleries)

WAVE is a free tool that checks sites by copying and pasting their web address. It is also available as a browser extension, as is axe DevTools and ARC Toolkit. All will help you spot accessibility issues, but WAVE uses less technical language. Choose whichever you're most comfortable with.

Then check for these specific issues with the following tools for thoroughness:

- HeadingsMap, for reviewing the heading structure
- Target size, for checking that links, buttons and form fields are big enough

Finally, follow the guidance from the Department for Work and Pensions to manually test:

- Responsive design
- Keyboard accessibility

Checking digital documents

- Microsoft Office accessibility checker is available for Word, Powerpoint, Excel, Outlook and OneNote
- for Google Workspace there are free extensions for checking Google Docs, Google Slides and Google Sheets (free of charge with paid features)
- Colour Contrast Analyser, which can also check web pages
- PAC PDF Accessibility Checker is a download for Windows
- PAVE 2.0 is an online tool for checking PDFs

There are also some manual checks for digital documents you should do, for things like reading order and meaningful link text.

Writing an accessibility statement

Providing an accessibility statement is a good practice for any website or digital application, because:

- being clear and transparent about barriers saves disabled people time
- providing contact details fosters a sense of trust

An accessibility statement provides information to people who may have problems using your website. W3C has advice on how to write a clear accessibility statement.

Public sector bodies are required to provide an accessibility statement using specific wording, as explained in this how-to guide by Make Things Accessible. The British Museum's accessibility statement is a good example.

Author and contributors

About the author

Nicola Saunders is Front-End Lead Developer at Studio 24, a digital agency specialising in accessible web design and development. Working in digital for over 15 years, she has helped many clients think about, understand and improve accessibility, including W3C, RNIB, and The Fitzwilliam Museum. Nicola is also the author of the Studio 24 Guide to accessible content.

Contributors

This work builds on Digital Skills for Heritage: Accessibility Online (2020) by Alistair McNaught, McNaught Consulting, for The National Lottery Heritage Fund, licensed under CC BY 4.0.

I'm grateful to the following people for their reviews:

- Simon Jones, Founder and Managing Director, Studio 24
- Josie Fraser, Head of Digital Policy, The National Lottery Heritage Fund

Sharing this guide

This work is shared under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) licence. Please attribute as 'An introduction to online accessibility (2026) by Nicola Saunders, Studio 24, for The National Lottery Heritage Fund, licensed under CC BY 40.'