# **Research: Measures to Improve Accessibility of Public Websites in Europe**

This report presents the outcomes of a study conducted for the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the National Disability Authority, and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources in Ireland focusing on the accessibility of key public services for citizens in the EU Member States.  The research was commissioned as an initiative under the Irish Presidency of the EU and as an action under Ireland’s National Digital Strategy.[[1]](https://universaldesign.ie/technology-ict/research-measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-europe/#NDS)

 This study aims is to make a new contribution to the existing evidence base on Web accessibility in order to support the current dialogues in the European Parliament and Council of Ministers around the European Commission’s recent proposal for a Directive in this area[[2]](https://universaldesign.ie/technology-ict/research-measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-europe/#EC). The proposal defines web accessibility as the principles and techniques to be observed when constructing websites, in order to render the content of these websites accessible to all users.[[3]](https://universaldesign.ie/technology-ict/research-measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-europe/#EC%20ibid)It aims to harmonise the measures which Member States use to make the content of public sector websites accessible. It includes a description of the scope, required level of accessibility with the relevant standard (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0) and timelines to be contained in the Directive.[[4]](https://universaldesign.ie/technology-ict/research-measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-europe/#WCAG)

The study applies a new perspective by looking at accessibility issues both from the 'outside' (through direct examination of the accessibility features in the public services listed in the Directive) and from the 'inside' (through interviews with web managers of these public services to gain insight into their activities, experiences and the challenges they may be facing).

In all, 37 web services in 7 different countries were evaluated, and a total of 327 individual tests were conducted. In addition, in-depth interviews involving 19 people from 13 public sector organisations were conducted in three countries (Germany, Ireland and Sweden).

Themes examined in the study were:

* Current levels of web accessibility among the selected Member States
* The types and levels of efforts potentially required by Member States to ensure their online public websites comply with the levels of accessibility listed within the proposed Directive.
* Web accessibility perceptions among web managers in public services

Based on these findings the report discusses implications for web accessibility policies at national and EU levels.

## **Summary of headline findings and recommendations**

The following are the key findings and recommendations drawn from the web accessibility assessment and interviews conducted.

### **Implications for web accessibility policies at EU level**

* EU-level web accessibility monitoring efforts should consider how operationally useful feedback can be provided to website managers and their organisations.  Many of the websites examined were found to contain few, relatively minor errors that could have been uncovered if regular monitoring of the website’s accessibility was in place.
* A prioritised and phased approach to implementing accessibility is practical.
* National web accessibility policies tend to be in place but there are significant variances in the level of practical supports and tools provided.  The centralised supports and tools for web development and management available within the public sector in Germany, for example, would seem to have a positive impact on levels of accessibility.
* Public procurement remains an underutilised tool in ensuring public website development and maintenance results in a high level of accessibility.

### **Implications for web accessibility policies and practices at national level**

#### **Key findings from the web accessibility assessments**

* Current levels of web accessibility remain low.  None of the 37 public service websites that were assessed across the 7 countries currently comply fully with the WCAG 2.0 AA requirements. However many of the errors detected were of a relatively minor nature.
* The efforts required by the public services to fully comply with WCAG 2.0 vary depending on technical as well as operational factors within the public sector organisation.
* The most striking accessibility barriers relate to documents, forms and multimedia.
* Web teams that manage public sector website need to have specific skills and knowledge related to accessibility.  More generally, training and capacity building is necessary for all staff that have a role in producing or commissioning content and documents published to the website

#### **General web accessibility perceptions among web managers**

* The focus on achieving accessibility remains more on a technical level than as a core aspect of how the service delivered to all citizens. According to one web manager interviewed, “Frequently accessibility is only associated with requirements that blind people have.”
* Organisational web policies and processes often do not consider accessibility as a ongoing issue but rather as a once off activity.

#### **Cost and benefits of web accessibility**

* The potential costs and efforts required by the public services to fully comply with WCAG 2.0 vary.  Key factors include the age of the website and technology used.  The frequency with which accessibility is checked has a significant impact on managing compliance with accessibility standards over time.  The routine publication of inaccessible content and documents to public sector websites seriously degrades their level of accessibility.
* Costs related to achieving accessibility to date are not perceived by the public sector organisations to be onerous or problematic.  Many of the efforts required to improve accessibility relate to capacity building and training of internal staff, both technical and non-technical.

[Measures to Improve Accessibility of Public Websites in Europe Exec Summary.pdf (size 781.3 KB)](https://universaldesign.ie/Web-Content-/Measures-to-Improve-Accessibility-of-Public-Websites-in-Europe-Exec-Summary.pdf)

[Measures to improve accessibility of public websites in Europe.pdf (size 2.4 MB)](https://universaldesign.ie/Web-Content-/Measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-Europe.pdf)

[[1]](https://universaldesign.ie/technology-ict/research-measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-europe/) Ireland’s National Digital Strategy. [http://www.dcenr.gov.ie/Communications/NDS/](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f4a16b-national-digital-strategy/)

[[2]](https://universaldesign.ie/technology-ict/research-measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-europe/) European Commission. Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council on the accessibility of public sector bodies' websites.[http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/news/proposal-directive-european-parliament-and-council-accessibility-public-sector-bodies-websites](https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/proposal-directive-european-parliament-and-council-accessibility-public-sector-bodies-websites)

[[3]](https://universaldesign.ie/technology-ict/research-measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-europe/) Ibid, page 2

[[4]](https://universaldesign.ie/technology-ict/research-measures-to-improve-accessibility-of-public-websites-in-europe/) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0, <http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/>