Údarás Náisiúnta Míchumais
National Disability Authority

Centre for Excellence
in Universal Design

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What public bodies need to know about Accessibility and Universal Design

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Introduction

This document outlines how accessibility and Universal Design applies to the work of government, public bodies and local authorities in Ireland. It explains key statutory obligations, relevant legislation, and supporting national guidance.

It may also be useful for other stakeholders who wish to understand how accessibility and Universal Design are applied in practice.

What is Universal Design

Universal Design (UD) is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be **accessed, understood and used** to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

The three key terms and examples from both the physical and digital environments are:

- Access – can you access the building and/or the website?
- Understand – Is the wayfinding in a building easy to understand, or the material on the website in plain English?
- Use – can you use the building (such as the toilets/meeting rooms) and/or online services (such as easily fill out an online form)?

The approach is commonly described through **the 7 principles of Universal Design**. These principles provide a framework for applying this approach in practice.

The 7 principles of Universal Design

Legislation and policy relevant to Universal Design

Prof Olaf Hedvall is one of our keynote speakers for Universal Design Conference 2026 (UD26). His recent work on accessibility, usability and Universal Design proposes, that accessibility, usability and UD are complementary but distinct[1]. He asserts that UD is societal and values-

[1] Per-Olof Hedvall, A.Stahl and S. Iwarsson (2025) Accessibility, usability and universal design – still confusing? Harmonisation of key concepts describing person-environment interaction to create conditions for participation, disability and rehabilitation, 47(25), pp.6750-6759. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/09638288.2025.2491831

based, and evaluation should shift beyond accessibility compliance towards participation and societal impact.

Several statutory requirements and national policies support the application of accessibility and Universal Design in practice.

Key statutory obligations

The following legislation places obligations on public bodies in relation to accessibility.

While Universal Design is a broad approach to design, much of the legislation that applies to public bodies focuses on accessibility. These requirements set baseline compliance standards that public bodies must meet. Accessible design focuses on ensuring that people with disabilities can use a product, service, or environment. This approach typically involves modifying existing designs or adding features that make them more usable for individuals with disabilities for example adding Alt text to an image for screen reader users, providing keyboard navigation for those who cannot use a mouse, adding a ramp to the entrance of a building to make it accessible. In summary accessibility is essential, it that it often addresses specific barriers rather than creating a fully inclusive experience from the outset.

Universal Design takes a broader approach, aiming to create products and environments that are usable by all people, regardless of age, size ability or disability, without the need for adaptations, for example automatic doors that benefit people with disabilities, parents with strollers, and people carrying heavy objects, captions on videos that help deaf users, people in noisy environments, and those learning a new language.

In summary rather than retrofitting accessibility solutions, universal design integrates inclusivity from the beginning, benefiting a broader range of people.

Disability Act (Part 6)

The Disability Act (2005) set out the statutory role of the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) as well as defining the term universal design: "means the design and composition of an environment so that it may be accessed, understood and used—

(i) to the greatest practicable extent,

(ii) in the most independent and natural manner possible,

(iii) in the widest possible range of situations, and

(iv) without the need for adaptation, modification, assistive devices or

specialised solutions, by persons of any age or size or having

any particular physical, sensory, mental health or intellectual ability or disability".

The role of the centre is clearly defined as:

The Centre shall facilitate the achievement of excellence in universal design by contributing to the development and promulgation of standards in that regard.

(2) In relation to the universal design of electronic systems, the Centre shall—

(a) support and assist in the development of standards of excellence by liaising with appropriate national and international standards bodies for this purpose,

(b) recommend those standards for adoption by bodies operating in the fields of information technology and telecommunications,

(c) encourage compliance by the bodies aforesaid with appropriate national and international standards in universal design, and

(d) provide information to those bodies in relation to the practical and theoretical aspects of supportive technologies.

(3) In relation to assisting and promoting the introduction of the principles of universal design to courses of education and training, the Centre shall liaise with vocational and third level educational institutions and with professional bodies to—

(a) encourage the training in universal design of persons providing—

(i) courses of education and training in universal design for persons preparing to engage in work affecting the environment, or

(ii) courses of training for persons engaged in such work,

(b) ensure as far as practicable that courses of education and training in the principles of universal design are provided for persons engaged in such work, including architects, engineers, town planners, systems analysts, software designers, transport providers and designers of passenger transport vehicles and passenger vessels,

(c) ensure the development of appropriate curricula so that the concept of universal design forms an integral part of the aforesaid courses,

(d) ensure as far as practicable that examinations recognised by professional bodies in such courses include material relating to those principles.

(4) In relation to the continued development of the principles of universal design, the Centre shall—

(a) assist in the development of knowledge, skills, understanding and values so as to enable persons engaged in work affecting the environment to strive towards achieving an environment that is universally designed,

(b) promote public awareness of the difficulties encountered by persons with disabilities in relation to the environment.

(5) The Centre shall engage in such practical and theoretical work in respect of matters relating to universal design as the Minister may specify from time to time.

Partnership arrangements.

19D.—Notwithstanding any provision of any other enactment, the Authority may, with the consent of the Minister and the Minister for Finance, make an arrangement, on such terms and conditions as it considers appropriate, with a person or persons for the performance, in partnership with the Authority, of specified functions of the Centre.".

The Disability Act (Part 3)

In relation to Accessibility of Public Services and Information, Part 3 of the Disability Act places significant responsibilities on public bodies to make their services accessible to people with disabilities. The NDA's monitors government departments and public bodies through the statutory Code of Practice As part of the NDA's statutory role under the Disability Act. The definition of services in the Disability Act also covers the accessibility of public buildings.

To assist public bodies with this requirement, there is the government's statutory **Code of Practice on Accessibility of Public Services and Information Provided by Public Bodies**. There is guidance on:

- Consulting with and seeking out the expertise of people with disabilities
- Access Officers
- Provision of information on the accessibility of services
- Procurement
- WAD compliance

- Complaints procedure under the Disability Act 2005
- Staff training

Key requirements for public bodies

- Each public body must have at least one designated Access Officer. The Access Officer helps people with disabilities to access services by providing, arranging and coordinating support where needed.
- Public Body must also ensure that the goods and services they use are accessible to people with disabilities, unless this is not practical or cannot be justified (for example, due to cost or significant delays). This includes items such as equipment, materials, and information technology.

If a Public Body does not provide accessible services as required, a person with a disability can make a complaint. If they are not satisfied with the outcome, they can appeal to the Ombudsman.

For more information on Part 3 of the Disability Act and the Statutory Code of Practice on Accessibility of Public Services and Information Provided by Public Bodies visit the Part 3 section of the NDA website.

Further practical guidance on engaging with disabled people is available on the NDA website.

The Disability Act (Part 5)

Under Part 5 of the Disability Act, public bodies must promote and support the employment of people with disabilities and meet a minimum statutory target of **6%** of staff being people with disabilities.

The NDA monitors the percentage of disabled employees in government departments and public bodies annually under Part 5 of the Disability Act. The minimum percentage is now 6% of the workforce are required to be disabled. The NDA also provides advice and guidance to support this work, including information on how to create an equal, diverse and inclusive work culture using a Universal Design approach, available on the NDA website. It has also recently developed a free introductory e-learning module on disability equality, which showcases this guidance and examples of good practice. This is available on the NDA learning hub.

For more information Part 5 of the Disability Act visit the Employment of persons with disabilities in the public section of the NDA website.

The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 (the 'Acts')

The Acts prohibit discrimination on a number of grounds, including disability. Discrimination on the ground of disability includes a refusal or failure by a service provider to do everything that is reasonably possible to meet the needs of a disabled person (reasonable accommodation). This

may include providing special treatment or facilities where, without them, it would be impossible or unreasonably difficult for the person to use the service.

The following service providers must do all that is reasonable to

accommodate the needs of a disabled person:

- a person selling goods or providing services;
- a person selling or letting accommodation or providing

  accommodation;
- educational establishments;
- clubs.

A guide to the Equal Status Acts 2000-2018 is available on ihrec.ie.

Irish Sign Language Act (ISL)

The ISL Act provides the right of Irish Sign Language users to use Irish Sign Language as their native language and the corresponding duty on all public bodies to provide Irish Sign Language users with free interpretation when availing of or seeking to access statutory entitlements and services.

The National Disability Authority (NDA) has reported on implementation of the ISL in 2021 and 2026 (publication pending). Report findings show operation of the ISL Act requires improvement.

EU Web Accessibility Directive (WAD)

Under the EU Web Accessibility Directive (WAD), public sector bodies in Ireland must ensure their websites and mobile applications are accessible to everybody, including people with disabilities.

The NDA carry out annual monitoring and reporting and is in the process of completing the sixth annual report. Progress in improving accessibility has been slow, but awareness is growing of the public bodies' obligations under the Directive and accessibility scores are beginning to improve. Several webinars and training sessions have been organised by the NDA over the last 5 years to raise awareness of the issues faced by disabled people. These include key barriers such as inaccessible PDFs and online forms.

For more information on accessibility requirements, monitoring, and reports, visit the Web Accessibility Directive section on the NDA website

European Accessibility Act (EAA)

The European Accessibility Act (EAA) is a European Directive that contains accessibility requirements for a range of products and services. This is now a regulation since 28 June 2025. The NDA is responsible for advising the relevant market surveillance authority and compliance authorities on the EAA accessibility requirements.

The EAA applies to the public procurement of any products and services that fall under the Directive.

These include:

- computers and operating systems
- ATMs, ticketing and check-in machines
- smartphones
- TV equipment related to digital television services
- telephony services and related equipment
- access to audio-visual media services such as television broadcast and related consumer equipment
- services related to air, bus, rail and waterborne passenger transport
- banking services
- e-books
- e-commerce

Individuals can make formal complaints to the relevant authority legislated for implementing and enforcing the Act. These authorities include:

- the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, which acts as the market surveillance authority, and
- the following compliance authorities:
    - Commission for Communications Regulation,
    - Coimisiún na Meán,
    - Irish Aviation Authority,
    - National Transport Authority and
    - the Central Bank of Ireland

For more information on which products and services the EAA applies to and who monitors them, visit the EAA section on the NDA website.

Guidance on procuring accessible information and communications technology (ICT)

European Standardisation Organisations CEN/CENELEC and ETSI have recently produced guidance for procurers. The report (TR 101 551) provides guidance on how to determine contract award criteria to meet the accessibility requirements of Directive (EU) 2019/882 (European Accessibility Act, EAA) and Directive (EU) 2016/2102 (Web Accessibility Directive, WAD). It also explains how to verify the conformance of publicly procured ICT products and services with these requirements. The report is available on the ETSI website (PDF).

Public Sector Duty

The Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (the Duty) is contained in Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014. It places a statutory obligation on public bodies to have regard to human rights and equality considerations in the performance of their functions.

Why is it Important?

Implementing the Duty means public bodies address human rights and equality issues in a proactive way, rather than waiting until an issue or complaint arises, before addressing it. The Duty has an important role to play in supporting public bodies to deliver efficient accessible services to citizens and communities, in particular those at risk of inequality and discrimination. It supports a public service-wide approach to equality, human rights, diversity and inclusion. The Duty applies across all functions of a public body, and implementing it puts equality and human rights into the mainstream of how public bodies carry out their daily work.

National policy

The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030

The strategy ensures that disabled people can fully participate in Irish society on an equal basis with others, recognising their right to live a life free from barriers. It takes a "whole-of-government" approach, meaning all parts of government work together to support disabled people. The key commitments are organised into five areas (called pillars), guided by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Public Bodies share responsibility with government departments and state agencies for planning and delivering the commitments across these five pillars:

- Inclusive learning and education
- Employment
- Independent living and active participation in society
- Wellbeing and health
- Transport and mobility

Taking just three of the pillars where there are commitments by all of government to deliver over the lifetime of the Strategy

Under Pillar 2 – **Employment** requires that Civil and Public Sector will maximise opportunities and access for disabled people to get meaningful work in the civil and public sector. Also, in the private Sector the commitment to promote the hiring and career advancement of disabled people across the private sector as well as supporting Disabled People to Work.

Under Pillar 3: Independent Living and Active Participation in Society, public bodies are responsible for supporting the inclusion of disabled people in their communities, including improving services and creating accessible environments such as the effective delivery of the National Housing Strategy for Disabled People (2022 – 2027). Also, that local authorities support the inclusion of disabled people in their local communities by continuing to improve services and by creating accessible environments where all disabled people can live independently and participate fully in all aspects of community life.

Under Pillar 5: Transport and Mobility Seamless and Accessible Journeys in Urban and Rural Areas. Ensuring a "whole-of-journey" approach applying Universal Design principles in the development of infrastructure and services to improve the accessibility of our transport system across the country. Also improving Personal Mobility by supporting those who cannot use or access any public transport, or who may need private transport to get to and from public transport, by providing disabled people with enhanced personal mobility options.

For more information on the key commitments visit gov.ie's Key Commitments under the Strategy web page.

National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022 - 2027
The first theme of the strategy is – Accessible Housing and Communities. This theme focuses on the provision of accessible housing for disabled

people, the promotion of accessible communities and **universally designed homes**. It is informed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and, in particular, "Article 19 -Living independently and being included in the community" and "Article 9 – Accessibility" which aims "to enable disabled people to live independently …and ensure disabled people have access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment."

Some key features of Universal Design homes are:

Easy, safe, access from the immediate neighbourhood to the entrance to the home works for everyone whether you are carrying shopping, with small children, or for an older person living alone.

Clever use of limited space designed for multi-purposes with wider

entrances works for young families who need ease of movement for strollers, for children's play areas, or for extra storage or shelving space, and it also works for wheelchairs and double buggies.

Providing homes with a flexible lay-out with more easily adaptable

internal walls allows the home to expand or contract as the family grows;

this works for for people living alone or independently with particular needs.

Ease of movement and simple control of the home environment and

systems works for everyone, but also improves quality of life for people

with temporary injuries, those with a disability who need to move safely around their home, and works for older people who are vulnerable to accidents in their homes.

Smart home services and entertainment enjoyed by everyone in their

homes can also work for the integration of assistive technologies for people with a disability, or for older people living alone.

Key proposed outcomes

- an increase in the provision of accessible housing for disabled people by the setting of local, need-related targets for all social housing providers using a universal design approach, as appropriate.

- Disabled people are supported to avail of housing opportunities that arise through the increase in supports, both formal and informal.

- Communities and housing developments are more accessible for disabled people.
- Local authorities strategically plan for the housing needs of disabled people in their administrative area.
- Provision of housing and related supports, that is in line with UNCRPD principles, is supported through collaboration between the HSE and local authorities at both national and local level and appropriate funding.

Further information available from the Housing Agency publication of the strategy: https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/2023-08/National-Housing-Strategy-for-Disabled-People-2022-2027.pdf

Housing Options for Older People (2017)
This policy includes a commitment, in partnership with industry, to introduce measures to increase the number of new homes built **using universal design principles.** Action 4.6 aims to ensure that 30% of all new homes are designed this way over a 5-year period.

For more information about this policy visit gov.ie's Housing Option for Our Ageing Population Policy Statement.

Universal Design Guidelines on Housing
Universal Design (UD) housing as stated above under Housing options for older people is also a key component of the government's policy.

The NDA's Universal Design for Homes in Ireland guidelines is designed to create homes that are easy to use and accommodate the needs of all ages.

The Town Centre First (TCF) Policy
The Town Centre First (TCF) Policy, launched in 2022, is a whole-of-Government approach to revitalising towns and villages.

For more information about the goals of this policy and how it works, visit the Town Centre First Policy page on Gov.ie.

Related resource

The 8th International Universal Design Conference (UD26) took place in Galway from 4-6 November 2026. Further information is available on the conference website. For more information visit ud26.ie

Relevant legislation

- Disability Act 2005
    - Available at https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2005/act/14/enacted/en/html
- The Equal Status Acts 2000-2018
    - Available at https://www.irishstatutebook.ie
- Irish Sign Language Act 2017
    - Available at https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/act/40/enacted/en/html
- European Union (Accessibility of Websites and Mobile Applications of Public Sector Bodies) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 358 of 2020)
    - Available at https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2020/si/358/made/en/print
- European Union (Accessibility Requirements of Products and Services) Regulations 2023 (S.I. No. 636 of 2023)
    - Available at https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2023/si/636/made/en/
- Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 (Section 42: Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty)
    - Available at https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2014/act/25/section/42/enacted/en/html

Further information and resources

Related resources available on the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design website:

- The 7 principles of Universal Design

- Available at: https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design/the-7-principles

- Customer Communications Toolkit for Services to the Public – A Universal Design Approach
    - Available at: https://universaldesign.ie/communications-digital/customer-communications-toolkit-a-universal-design-approach

- Web Accessibility Techniques hub. Role-specific guidance for digital designers, content providers, developers and other digital professionals supporting compliance with the Web Accessibility Directive.
    - Available at: https://universaldesign.ie/communications-digital/web-and-mobile-accessibility/web-accessibility-techniques

- Universal Design Guidelines for Homes in Ireland
    - Available at: https://universaldesign.ie/built-environment/housing

Related resources available on the National Disability Authority website:

- Ireland's Monitoring Report for the EU Web Accessibility Directive 2025
    - Available at https://nda.ie/publications/monitoring-report-eu-wad-ireland-2021-nda-report

- Participation Matters: Guidelines on implementing the obligation to meaningfully engage with disabled people in public decision making
    - Available at https://nda.ie/publications/participation-matters-guidelines

Related resources available on the National Transport Authority website:

- The Universal Design Walkability Audit Tool
    - Available at https://www.nationaltransport.ie/news/the-universal-design-walkability-audit-tool/

Related resources on the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI) website

- Design for All standard (available for purchase)
    - Available at: https://www.nsai.ie/about/news/a-design-standard-that-works-for-all/

Related resources on the ETSI website

- CEN/CLC/ETSI Guidelines for public procurement of ICT products and services in the EU; Accessibility award criteria and conformity assessment (PDF)
    - Available at: https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi_tr/101500_101599/101551/02.01.01_60/tr_101551v020101p.pdf



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