

Accessibility guidance

April 2024

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About this resource

We are committed to making sure all of our information is clear and accessible for everyone.

With more people seeking advice and information or sharing their views with us online, we must take steps to ensure our digital platforms are accessible to most people.

This guidance highlights key areas and the simple steps you can follow to ensure you are as accessible as possible.

What do we mean by accessibility?

Accessibility means ensuring that everyone can access your information, providing equal access and opportunities to people with diverse abilities.

Having accessible platforms ensures they are easy for everyone to use and to understand the information we share.

Whose responsibility is it to ensure accessibility?

It is all our responsibility to make sure that everything is done with accessibility in mind. We are all required to meet the Equality Act 2010, and you should have an accessibility policy on your website outlining how you aim to meet the legal requirements.

The content you produce and upload (news, reports, videos, images, social media posts) must continue to meet high standards to ensure you provide information that everyone can easily benefit from.

People who have a good experience and can find and understand information quickly and easily are more likely to return to you again.

Who benefits from accessibility?

The short answer is everyone!

Latest estimates from the Department for Work and Pensions indicate that approximately 16 million people in the UK have a disability, which is nearly 24% of the population.

However, accessible content benefits everyone. For example, lots of people watch videos on their phone in an environment where they can't have the sound on – on the train, in a waiting room or in noisy café – so subtitles help them understand the content.

What standards do we need to meet?

Online accessibility standards are set by the World Wide Web Consortium – also known as W3C. They developed the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) which monitors accessibility across three levels:

- A – the lowest level
- AA – the mid-range level. This is what we aim to meet.
- AAA – the top standard for accessibility.

WCAG is not a legal requirement but is a set of globally adopted standards that organisations committed to providing accessible information can use to ensure that their platforms are accessible.

The guidelines aim to make websites, apps, electronic documents, and digital assets accessible to people with a broad range of disabilities, including sensory, intellectual, learning and physical disabilities.

Online accessibility

Your website

If you are using the Healthwatch website template

The Healthwatch website template has been built to meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 to level AA.

As accessibility guidance evolves, we will continue to get external organisations to conduct reviews to highlight areas we could improve make any changes needed.

WCAG recently updated their guidelines in September 2023 from 2.1 to 2.2 which introduced some new accessibility criteria. Following this update, we have paid for a new external audit on the website and developments to ensure we continue to offer a website that follows the most recent accessibility guidelines.

If you are using another website

Your website should also be meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 to level AA.

We would recommend contacting an organisation such as RNIB or Silk Tide to perform an accessibility check on your website to make sure you're following best practice.

Website accessibility guidelines cover many areas – so it is important it is built into the design and development of your website, not just the content.

Alternative text

What is alternative text?

Alternative text (alt-text) allows people with visual impairments to understand the images you display on your website. Adding alt-text provides a text alternative to photos on your digital platforms.

Screen readers automatically detect alt text and announce it as an image. Your alt text should not, therefore, contain "Image of..." as a screen reader would read this as "Image, image of an apple".

If you do not put alt text on an image, a screen reader will read the file name. A file name has no context and often makes no sense, creating a poor user experience for your website visitors.

Alt text has several functions:

- Screen readers read it in place of images allowing the content and function of the image to be understood by those with visual or cognitive disabilities.
- It is displayed in place of the image in browsers if the file cannot load or the user has chosen not to view it.
- It provides meaning and description to images that search engines can read.

Screen readers cannot analyse an image and decide what it shows. Your alt text must therefore provide the content and function of the picture.

Top tips

- Be accurate and present both the content of the image and the function (e.g. link) if there is one.
- Keep it short. Try to restrict the text to a short sentence or two.
- Do not repeat the same sentence that you have written in the accompanying text.

[More information on providing suitable alternative text.](#)

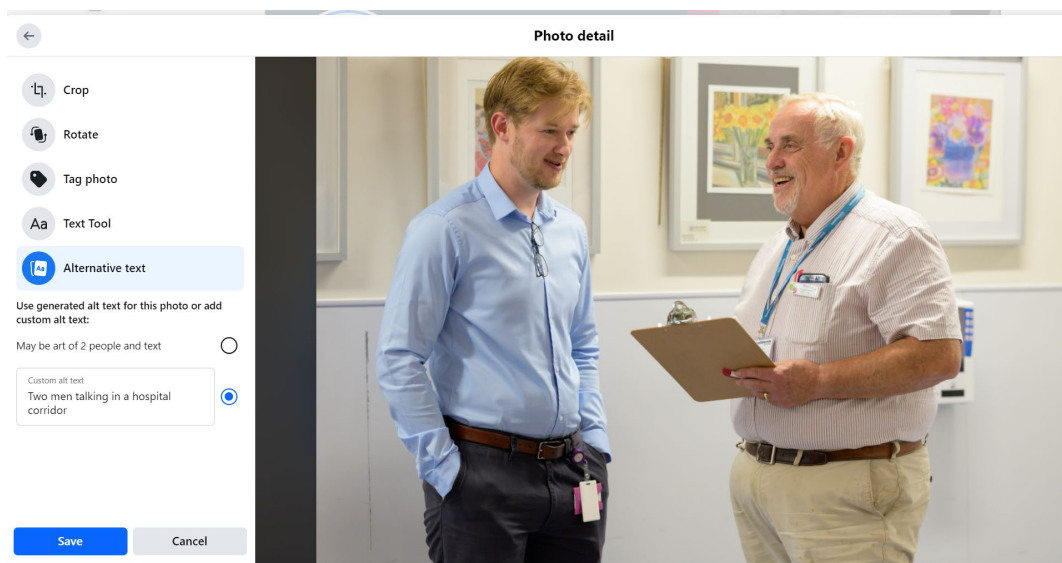
Where to use alt text

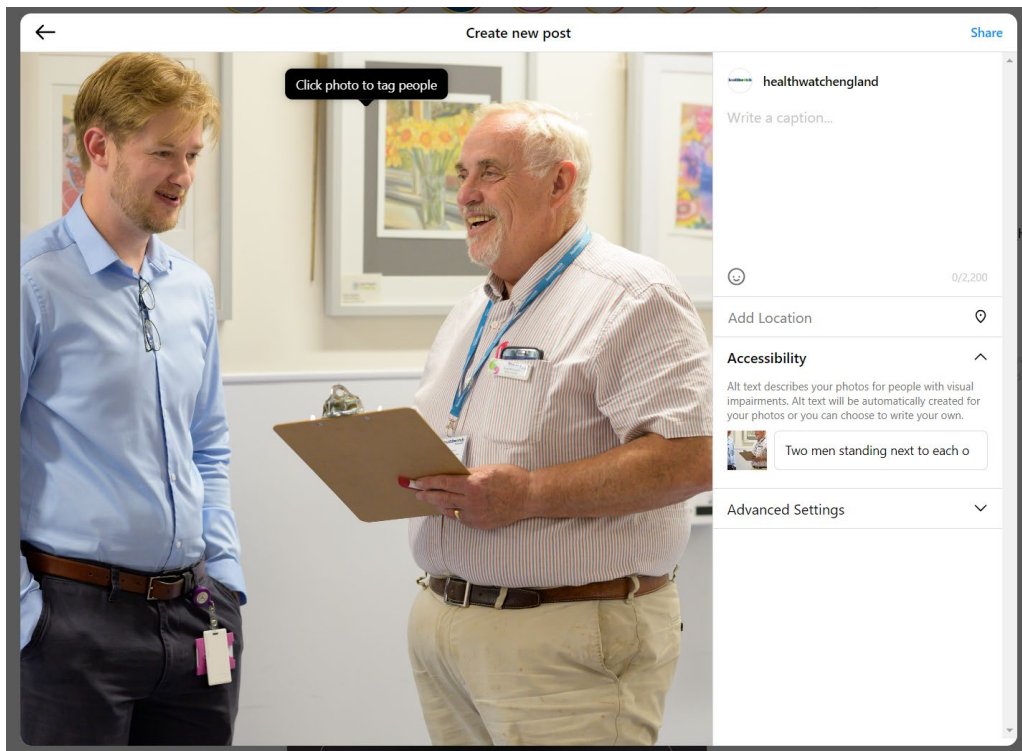
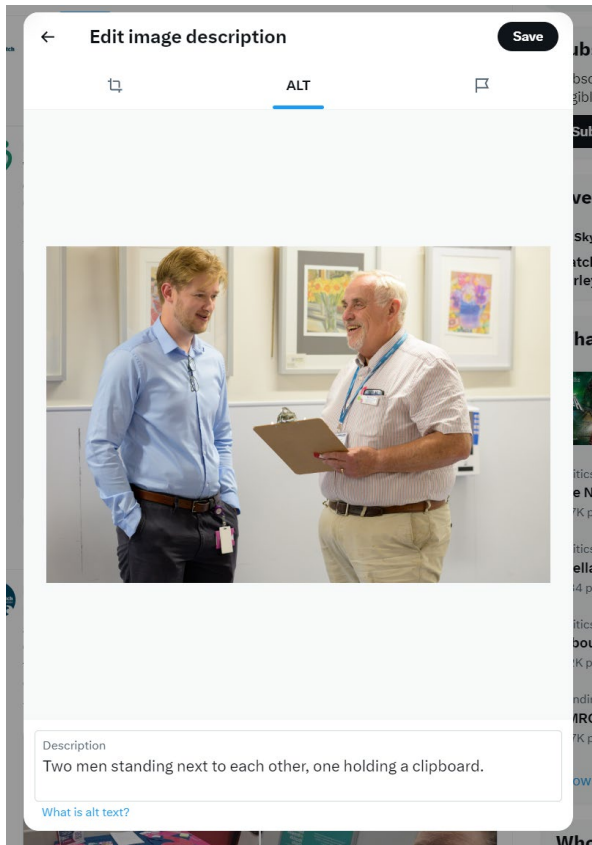
It is essential to use alternative text for all images on digital platforms. This includes your website and your social media platforms.

On your website, you need to upload alt text for every image you display on your site.

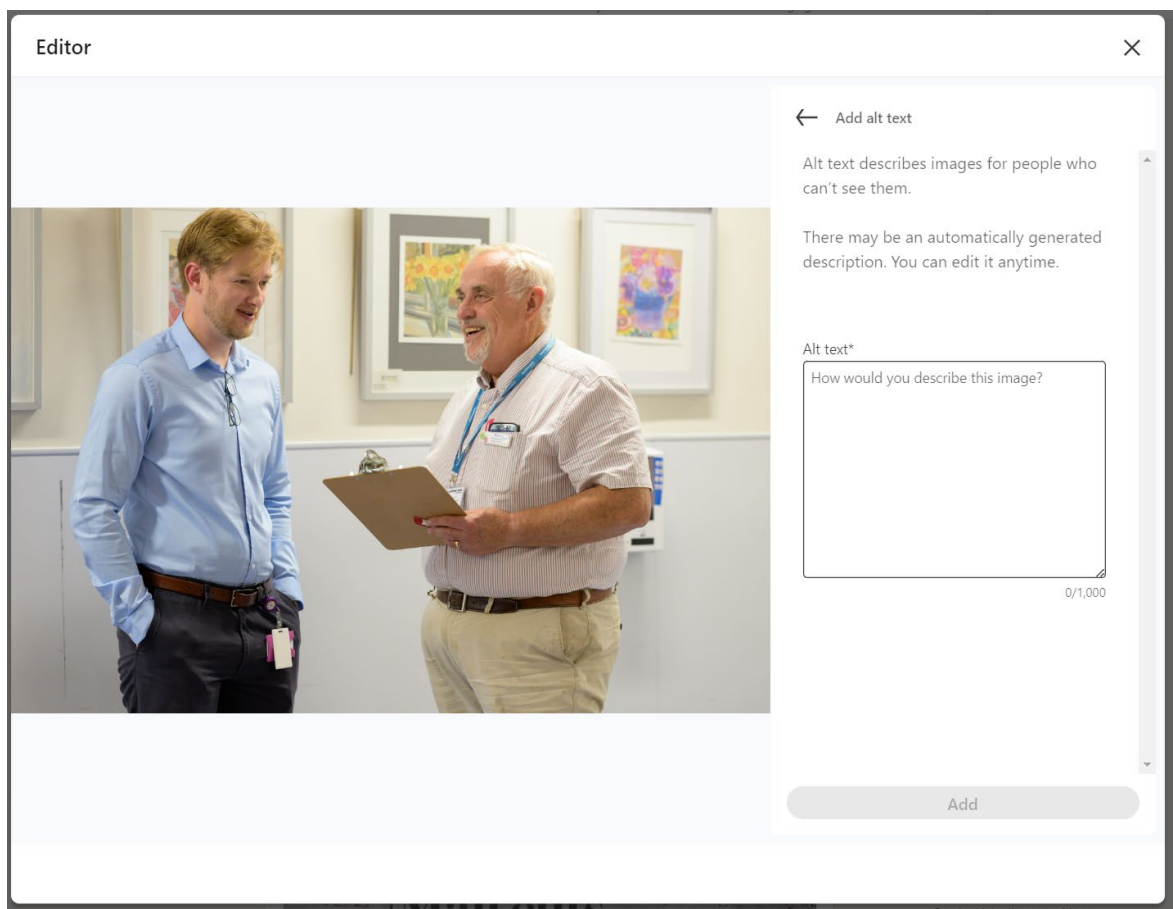
If you are uploading social media images directly to the platform, this allows you to include the alternative text:

- **Facebook:** Add your image, then click 'edit'. Select 'alternative text' from the list, and either use their suggested alt text or add custom text of your own.





- **LinkedIn:** Add an image to your post, and one of the options is 'add alt text'. Click this, and you'll get 300 characters to write your alt text.



Problems with images of text

Images with text are not accessible and wherever possible should be avoided. Examples of this could be:

- Uploading a poster with lots of pictures and text as an image to your website.
- Using images with a lot of text on social media
- Using images of word clouds or similar

No screen reader can currently read text inside an image. Images with logos are the exception providing they have alt text.

Top tips:

- If you use an image with text in it, your alt text must describe the image and contain all the words from the image.

- If you use an image with text in it, you must ensure the image complies with colour contrast restrictions to meet WCAG accessibility standards – contrast ratio of 4.5:1. [You can check the colour contrast on this website.](#)
- Remember that as part of our accessibility standards the website must function when zoomed in to 400% – the text in an image must still be legible at this rate, same as the rest of the website.

[Find out more information on using images that contain text.](#)

Using multimedia

When uploading multimedia content ensure it has accompanying text. There are several ways you might do this, depending on the content.

There are several tools you can use to edit your videos. These include using the subtitle function when you upload a video to [YouTube](#), or by using online software such as [VEED video editing software](#).

Transcripts

A transcript is a text version of the media content. This is often uploaded as a document someone can open and read the entire transcript in one go. This makes video content accessible for people who:

- Can't hear due to auditory problems.
- Process information differently due to cognitive impairments.
- Speak a different language.
- Learn better by skimming text.
- Have limited mobile data or a poor internet connection speed.
- Can't play audio due to their environment.

Captions

Captions are a text version of the media content that is synchronised with the video. There are two types of captions – open and closed. Open captions are always turned on, whereas closed captions can be turned on or off by the user. Captions help people who:

- Are in a noisy environment.
- Have trouble understanding a speaker's accent.

- Prefer to read along as they listen.
- Speak a different language.
- Have limited or no hearing.
- Need to watch videos on mute due to their environment.

Audio descriptions

An audio description is a separate audio track that describes important visual content, making it accessible to people who can't see what is happening in the video, for example facial expressions, movements or hand actions. Audio descriptions help people who:

- Have visual impairments.
- Are auditory learners.
- Are actively engaged in video viewing and so pay better attention.
- Lack proficiency in the language.
- Struggle with visual processing issues.
- Are autistic and need more information on emotions and social cues.

[Find out more information on transcripts, captions, and audio descriptions.](#)

Flashing content

Your website should not contain anything that flashes more than 3 times per second as it can cause seizures or migraines. You can use the Trace Centre's Photosensitive Epilepsy Analysis Tool (PEAT) to check content that flashes meet the required standards.

[Try the PEAT tool](#)

[Find out more information on flashing content.](#)

Downloads

When adding documents / downloads remember that these must be accessible too.

Microsoft Word, Google docs and Apple Pages all have accessibility features built in, such as heading styles, quote functions and the ability to add alternative text.

It is important to consider whether a download is necessary – or whether the text can be included within the website page. If it is a short document, is it possible to have the text contents on the web page and avoid the need for a download at all?

Downloads have added complications for people who use assistive technology. They also make content harder for other people to access – for example, people who are out and about and don't have enough mobile data to download the document.

[Find out more about the Governments recommendations on publishing accessible documents.](#)

PDFs

PDF's can make your content harder for a user to find and use. Some of the problems with PDFs include:

- They don't work well with screen readers.
- They do not change size to fit the browser.
- They're not designed for reading on screen.
- They cause difficulties for navigation and orientation.
- They can be hard for some users to access.

[Read more information on the accessibility problems of PDFs.](#)

Rather than producing PDFs where possible try to use more accessible formats, such as writing the text out onto a webpage in HTML format or producing a word document.

Accessible PDFs

PDF's must have accessibility information such as headings, alt text and properties manually built in.

When creating a PDF, it is important to consider accessibility before converting the file to a PDF. In the original application you used to create the document consider:

- Is it well written?
- Have you added alternative text to all images and graphs?
- Are all tables optimised?

- Have you used headings?
- Are these headings correctly tagged? (E.g. H1 / H2 / H3)

Some paid for programmes such as Adobe software can tag content more thoroughly than other programmes, allowing you to create more accessible documents. However, we would still recommend using as few PDFs as possible.

Converting a word document to a PDF

Once your word document is complete, you have tagged all your headings and added alt text for all your images and graphs you are ready to convert it to a PDF.

Before converting it is worth using the inbuilt accessibility checker.

Go to View – Check accessibility.

This will produce a toolbar which will highlight any outstanding accessibility issues, such as inadequate colour contrast or missing alt text.

To convert the document to the most accessible PDF:

- Go to File – Export
- Select “create PDF”.
- Click the grey button titled “options”.
- Ensure that the box next to “Document structure tags for accessibility” is ticked.
- Click save.

Saving your documents in this way will ensure that the PDF preserves the documents accessibility features as much as possible.

[Find out more information on creating accessible PDFs](#)

[Read Microsoft support advice on creating accessible PDFs](#)

Accessibility overlays

Overlays are added to a website and give people more accessibility options such as resizing text, changing colour, or highlighting elements.

Examples of these are platforms such as ReciteMe or BrowseAloud.

Your website consists of many elements of code. These tell your browser what the content looks like on your page. An overlay changes these elements in your browser without changing the underlying code.

What are the main issues with overlays?

Technical issues:

- Potential security risks – data is transferred between your site and third-party servers, creating privacy and security risks.
- Potential impact on page load speeds – the additional scripts on your site could slow down your page loading speeds, creating a worse user experience.

Functional issues:

- Assistive technology is increasingly used by people who face accessibility issues online. An overlay can override existing assistive technology. This can be a frustrating experience for someone who uses assistive technology and overlays require them to change how they would normally navigate.
- Overlays are not mobile-device compatible – they will not help you conform to any of the accessibility rules that apply to mobile devices.
- Design and functionality are unaffected – so inaccessible functions (such as a carousel with no pause button) will remain inaccessible.

Accessibility platforms

Rather than investing in an overlay system to improve part of your website's accessibility, you can invest in a platform that can check and monitor your website against WCAG standards.

Platforms that can monitor accessibility can show you accessibility issues across your site and explain how to fix them.

Online platforms available include:

- Silk Tide
- Site Improve
- Mondiso

Automated testing on these platforms alone will not make your site 100% accessible. For example, they can test that alternative text is present on images but cannot check that the alternative text makes sense.

Automated testing can find a broad range of issues quickly, across all your webpages and helps you find obvious accessibility issues before your users do.

Writing accessible content

Writing content that is accessible is crucial. Content is everything on your website and social media channels.

Research shows that most users prefer simple language, including specialist audiences. This helps the user to understand and process the information quickly and with minimal effort.

Structuring your content

Always use headings

Headings represent the key concepts and supporting ideas in the article.

Using screen readers (technology that helps people with visual impairments access and interact with digital content via audio or touch) allows people to logically navigate an article and understand its structure.

Visually, headings convey levels of importance, allowing readers to find the information they are looking for quickly.

- The heading should summarise the paragraph below it.
- Headings should always have the largest heading at the top of the page (Heading one). It would be best if you then use the headings in size order (Heading two – five).
- Never use the same heading text twice in an article / on a page as this confuses screen readers. For example, don't have two sections called 'Volunteering with us' on the same page.

[Find out more information on headings here.](#)

Start with the most important information

Online, research shows that the user will scan the page in an F shape – across the top and down the left-hand side.

- Always start an article with the most important piece of information you want the reader to take away.
- Use headings aligned to the left throughout the body of the text to catch a reader’s attention as they scan down the page.

[Find out more about how to put key content at the top of your page.](#)

Ensure your links are descriptive

Screen readers analyse links to determine whether there is any useful related content on a page. Because of this, they often process links out of context.

The link must, therefore, make sense out of context. For example, “Read our accessibility guidance” not “Click here”

- If a link is to a document, describe that in the link so that users know what to expect. For example, "Download our accessibility guidance pdf".
- Wherever possible, links to another page on your website should open in the same window. Screen readers do not announce that a new window has opened, so users can then find it very frustrating or confusing when the ‘Go back’ function doesn’t work.
- When you add a link, you should also add an “title” so that when someone hovers over the link they know what to expect. To do this on the Healthwatch website, when you add the URL underneath you should also complete the “Title” box.

Link URL
https://www.healthwatch.co.uk/adv

Title
Find out how to get an NHS dentist

▼ Advanced

ARIA label

ID

Link relationship

Open in new window

✓ ✗

[Find out more information on how to display links.](#)

Writing well for an online audience

Use plain English

For most people, reading from a screen is more tiring than from a piece of paper. People typically read 25% slower on screen, so ease the burden and keep your language simple to understand.

People read differently online than they do on paper. They scan web pages and read, on average, about 18% of what is on the page. Keep your content short and straightforward so that everyone can understand it.

Top tips:

- Keep your sentences and paragraphs concise.
 - Sentences should be less than 20 words long.
 - Paragraphs should be just one concept – ideally no more than three sentences.
 - Refer to the reader as 'you' and your Healthwatch as 'we'.
 - Break up your text with lists – bullet points make content more manageable and easier to digest. Ensure you always use the bullet points in the formatting toolbar – these mean that a screen reader will recognise it as a list and announce it to the user.
 - Do not use jargon, long or complicated words. Do not assume jargon used within Healthwatch (for example Enter and View) will be automatically understood by the public.
 - Always write out an abbreviation on the first reference. For example, the first reference in every article should read "Integrated care system (ICS)".
 - Limit the use of decorative fonts within the document and stick to ones that are easy to read online.
 - Use paragraph formatting and don't add extra blank returns to create extra space as these create a poor experience for screen reader users.
 - Check your use of colours complies with colour contrast accessibility standards.
 - Use left alignment for all your text.
 - Avoid underlining titles, the only text that should be underlined is links.
-

[Look at our brand language guide that includes top tips to write in our tone of voice and a style guide.](#)

[Find out more about making your content easy to read.](#)

The importance of the language you use

It is essential to write about people in a way that is both respectful and inclusive. You need to respect the way people want to be described and acknowledge that language is constantly changing, and once acceptable terms might no longer be advisable to use.

Person-first vs identity first language

The debate over whether to use person first or identify first language has been around for a long time.

This is the concept of either referring to the person first before their disability or condition, for example, 'A person with Schizophrenia' or 'A Schizophrenic'.

It is important that you take the time to do your research and find out what is most appropriate to those that you are referring to. One way to do this would be to check in with a local community group or charity and ask for advice, they'll be able to tell you what language works best when trying to speak to their audience, or about them.

If you are writing a case study, it's always best to check in with the individual and ask how they like to be described.

Positive not negative phrases

Avoid using negative phrases such as 'suffers from' or 'confined to'.

For example, many wheelchair users do not view themselves as 'confined to a wheelchair, but instead think of it as a mobility aid.

Everyday phrases

Most disabled people do not have a problem with everyday phrases such as 'pleased to see you' or 'going for a walk'. However, you should still carefully consider them before including them in your content to ensure they are still appropriate.

Avoid everyday phrases that associate impairments with a negative sentiment – for example, 'blind drunk' or 'they were deaf to our request'.

Choosing your words

Our [brand language guide](#) has some suggestions around which phrases and words to avoid using in your communications. Language is constantly changing, and you must consider that this list will always change too.

Words or phrases that were once acceptable are now not used, such as the term BAME. One of the issues with this term is that it is too broad and covers so many groups of people. When planning your work, think about your audience and be as specific as possible (e.g. Do you want to hear from the Pakistani community?)

Another helpful resource for words you should avoid using is [the Government website](#) – where they have a list of terms you should avoid and alternatives to use instead.

Testing your accessibility

Most computers now have the functionality to read webpages and documents out loud to you, without needing to download any software.

You can also turn this setting on in most web browsers, including Google Chrome and Microsoft Edge.

On a Windows device

- Go to start - settings – ease of access – narrator
- Click the slider next to 'Turn on narrator' to activate it.
- Go to the web page or document you are trying to view
- Move your cursor to the area of text you want Narrator to read and press 'Caps lock' + 'R'
- To stop the Narrator from speaking simply press 'Ctrl'.

On an Apple device

- To turn on VoiceOver press 'Command-F5'
- When VoiceOver is turned on you can use VoiceOver commands to navigate and interact with items on the screen.
- You can enter VoiceOver commands by holding down 'Ctrl' and 'option' keys together.

There is also software you can download to read your documents out loud, including [NV access](#).

Other useful resources

- Colour contrast checker to ensure you meet WCAG standards – [visit WebAIM: Contrast Checker](#).
- Grammarly, a free online checker to ensure your language is clear and effective – [Visit Grammarly website](#).
- WCAG guidelines [Read the online guidelines about accessible standards](#).
- There is also a handy Facebook group that looks at accessibility. There are lots of specialists in this group, but also Communications professionals who help and answer each other's questions. [Join the group on Facebook](#).
- [Try this free tool to help you write in plain English](#).
- [Find out more information about writing using plain English](#).

Event accessibility

You also need to consider accessibility options for your face-to-face meetings and engagement events.

Choosing a venue

When you are choosing a venue there are a few important points you need to consider.

- **Travelling to the venue.** Can you easily access the venue by car, on foot and by public transport?
- **Accessing the venue.** Is the venue wheelchair friendly? Can you enter the building, access the meeting room, and visit the toilets without needing to negotiate steps?
- **Parking.** Is there a free car park or drop off area for people who wish to drive to the event?

- **Lighting.** Does the room have enough lighting and isn't too dark? If there are lots of windows, are there blinds to reduce glare if you are going to use digital presentations?
- **Accessible facilities.** Are there facilities suitable for everyone?

Accessibility support

Before the event you need to consider what kind of support you might want to offer at the event. Examples of the types of support you can offer include:

- British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters
- Interpreters into different languages
- Lip speakers (who interpret accurately for lip readers).
- Hearing loops (to support people wearing hearing aids)

Providing this kind of support can often be expensive, especially if you host several events throughout the year.

Before your event, once you have decided what kind of support you would ideally like to offer, it is worth considering what local organisations you can reach out to and partner with.

In exchange for help providing accessibility services, you can help raise awareness of their charity or service. You can have information available at the event and mention their presence in all advertising before the event.

Accessibility support is also an important thing to consider when you are talking to your commissioners and funders about budget for the year.




Brand accessibility

Our refreshed brand has now been launched and it is important to remember to apply it to all your communications.

Colour palette

Our new colour palette has eight colours in it. The three core colours have not changed, but the supporting colours have been updated to offer more flexibility in your design.

Core colours

Healthwatch blue	Healthwatch pink	Healthwatch green
		

Supporting colours

Yellow	Teal	Light blue	Dark grey	Light grey
				

Accessible colour combinations

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines state that online, text and its background must have a colour contrast.

The required ratio is higher for AAA level compliance, than it is for AA level compliance. The website template we offer, and the Healthwatch England website are AA level compliant, so these contrast ratio of 4.5:1 must be met as a minimum.

If you use a different website and claim to be AAA compliant, you will need to ensure you maintain this with the use of the new colour palette.

To ensure you comply with these regulations ensure you check which colours in our palette are compatible with each other, and with white or black before committing to any design.

Fully compliant combinations:

These colour combinations meet all the contrast requirements so either can be used as the background colour and the other as the text colour.

- Healthwatch blue and white
- Healthwatch green and black
- Light blue and black
- Yellow and black
- Teal and black
- Black and white

Partially compliant combinations:

These colour combinations are only compliant in some situations:

- Healthwatch blue and yellow – AA fully compliant / AAA compliant at font size 18+
- Healthwatch pink and black – AA fully compliant / AAA compliant at font size 18+
- Healthwatch blue and light blue – AA fully compliant / AAA compliant at font size 18+
- Healthwatch pink and white – AA compliant only at font size 18+
- Healthwatch blue and teal – AA compliant only at font size 18+
- Healthwatch blue and Healthwatch green – AA compliant only at font size 18+

Not compliant combinations:

Do not use these colour combinations from our palette in your communications.

- Healthwatch blue and Healthwatch pink
- Healthwatch pink and Healthwatch green
- Healthwatch green and white
- Yellow and white
- Teal and white
- Light blue and white
- Healthwatch blue and black
- Healthwatch pink and yellow
- Healthwatch pink and teal
- Healthwatch pink and light blue

Accessible typography

Accessible communications should consider the follow key points. Remember to keep your target audience in mind when writing or designing your communications.

Type size

The RNIB See It Right guidelines recommend a minimum x-height of 2mm. This equates to 10 point when using Poppins.

Capital letters

Copy should always be written using both upper and lowercase letters where appropriate, as using all upper or lower case makes text harder to read.

Italics

These should only be used if absolutely necessary as they do make text harder for some people to read.

Alignment

Left aligned text is most accessible. Try to use this instead of centre aligned, or text designed to fill the width of the page. This ensures the spaces between the words are always equal.

Text in a single column is best for accessibility. If you have more than one column ensure the correct accessibility tags are applied and test with a screen reader before publishing to ensure the screen reader recognises and reads the columns correctly.

Many screen readers ignore columns and read across the page regardless, meaning your document may not make any sense.

Got a question on accessibility?

Remember Workplace is there for you to ask questions and discuss ideas. If you have a question around whether content is accessible feel free to post in the Communications and Engagement group.

[Go to the group on Workplace group.](#)

If you need help with a specific query, please feel free to drop us an email and we will do our best to help.

Email us at hub@healthwatch.co.uk

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National Customer Service Centre
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e: enquiries@healthwatch.co.uk

 [@HealthwatchE](https://twitter.com/HealthwatchE)

 [Facebook.com/HealthwatchE](https://www.facebook.com/HealthwatchE)

healthwatch