Is Your Annual Report Accessible?

We all know that the annual report is more than just a profit and loss statement. Annual reports are typically filled with important and often critical information about the charity's finances, its performance, and its goals for the future. But if they're not accessible, then this information can't be used by everyone who needs it. This is especially important if the purpose of the charity is to support people with disabilities. Being authentic to the purpose of the organisation is critical to its values and mission.

Additionally, annual reports are often used by corporate donors and other stakeholders to gauge the health and performance of the organisation. If these reports are not accessible, they can exclude people with disabilities from participating in this important process.

Finally, accessible annual reports can help charities and their supporters show their commitment to inclusivity and social responsibility.

The international standard is the World Access Content Guideline (WCAG) and the most up to date version is 2.1 AA. This is recognised in EU and Irish legislation and will be further reinforced by the forthcoming European Accessibility Act which comes into effect in June 2025. The current legislation states that any PDF produced after 2018 has to be digitally accessible.

Pointers to keep in mind

- An annual report is generally published in PDF format and the first thing to remember is to design your annual report keeping accessibility in your mind right from the beginning. Think accessibility right from the beginning to avoid retrofitting costs.
- A person with a visual impairment may use a screen reader which will read aloud the text contained in a document. However, the screen reader can generally only read out searchable text (text that can be highlighted with your cursor) and is unlikely to be able to read text contained in a scan of a printout. The screen reader cannot read out images unless there is a caption beneath the image with an alternative text description. A screen reader also has a limited ability to identify the logical order of items in a document. For example, if there is an image with a caption contained within a block of text, it may read the caption in the middle of that block of text.
- When creating a PDF, there are a few things you can do to ensure it is accessible to all users. Here are some tips:

1. Use a tool that can create "tagged" PDFs. PDF tagging is a system of labelling the different elements of a pdf to indicate whether an item within the pdf is a heading, a paragraph of text, a picture etc. This can be done manually in tools like Adobe Acrobat Pro or there are some tools which can do a first pass at tagging, and then any errors can be rectified manually. PDF tagging will ensure that the PDF can be read by screen readers and other assistive technologies.
2. Use simple, easy-to-read fonts such as Arial, Helvetica Neue, or Verdana.
3. Where graphics or images are necessary, make sure to tag the element as an image and include alternative text descriptions of the image in a caption.
4. Use clear and concise language throughout the PDF.
5. Ensure that the PDF has a logical structure and is easy to navigate. The "reading order" can also be set within some pdf tools to indicate which item logically follows on from the previous item so that assistive technology can read out the elements of the document in the right order.
6. Make sure to download the pdf as a "searchable pdf". If you cannot highlight the text within the final pdf with your cursor, then a screen reader is unlikely to be able to read it. Most pdfs automatically download as searchable. However, pdfs which are made by printing a document (often to sign it) and then scanning the document back into a pdf form are often not searchable. Where a wet signature is required on a document which you would like to make accessible online, keep as much of the document as possible as a searchable pdf. Print out, sign and scan only the signature pages and then merge these pages back into your searchable pdf.

Documents to make accessible

Along with your annual report, there are a variety of documents that charities should make accessible. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Whitepapers
- Proxy Statements
- eBooks & Viewbooks
- Infographics
- ESG & Sustainability Reports
- Donor and Corporate communications
- e-Brochures
- Interactive PDFs

- Brand Toolkits and other marketing collaterals.

Making these documents accessible to clients ensures that they are well informed about the work that you are doing on their behalf. It also helps to build trust and confidence in your charity.

By considering inclusion as part of your Annual Report, by making your PDF accessible and compliant you are baking inclusion into your publication. No one in our sector is actively looking to exclude our community but we must make ourselves aware what accessibility is really all about. Digitally accessible annual reports are the same as a ramp into you building, you wouldn't think of saying we don't need a ramp for access, digital accessibility is the same thing.

Think digital accessibility as you are putting your annual reports together. If you need help and support please contact www.ialabs.ie

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