

Report title	Website accessibility improvements
Report author	Stephen Bowen, Head of Digital Innovation
Department	Digital Services
Exempt?	No

Purpose of report:

To resolve.

Synopsis of report:

This report proposes a website accessibility project to ensure Runnymede Council's website meets the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 standards. This project involves a thorough review of our website against WCAG 2.2 criteria, identification of areas requiring improvement, and subsequent updates to website templates and content.

The project aims to ensure our website is accessible to everyone. To achieve this goal, this paper requests approval from the Corporate Management Committee to proceed with the project and release the allocated budget of £10,000 from the capital programme to invest in essential upgrades to our website templates and tools.

Recommendation(s):

Corporate Management Committee are asked to:

1. Note the project proposals to improve the accessibility and usability of our website, www.runnymede.gov.uk.
2. Approve the release of £10,000 from the Council's capital programme provisional scheme to commence essential website improvements. This investment will ensure our online presence meets the latest accessibility standards.

1. Background and proposal

- 1.1 Web accessibility ensures everyone, regardless of ability, can use websites effectively. This includes people with visual impairments, hearing difficulties, cognitive disabilities, or those relying on assistive technologies.
- 1.2 Runnymede Council takes pride in its commitment to web accessibility. For over 15 months, our website held the top spot nationally based on an independent benchmark by Silktide utilising a national accessibility index of all UK Councils. This achievement reflects our dedication to providing an inclusive online experience for all residents.
- 1.3 However, the landscape of web accessibility has evolved with the release of the new Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 in October 2023. While our website excelled under the previous standards (2.1), some work is required to meet these stricter yet essential accessibility requirements.

- 1.4 WCAG 2.2 builds upon the foundation laid by WCAG 2.0, offering an enhanced approach to web accessibility. WCAG 2.0 established a core set of 61 success criteria, WCAG 2.2 Introduces 9 new criteria with a specific focus on improving the user experience for people with cognitive and learning disabilities, those with low vision, and users on mobile devices with touchscreens.
- 1.5 WCAG 2.2 maintains backward compatibility, which means that websites which meet the latest version automatically meet the requirements of WCAG 2.0 and 2.1. The focus on user experience extends beyond technical specifications, it places a greater emphasis on ensuring assistive technologies can effectively access and interact with web content and functionalities published on our website including PDF's.
- 1.6 This report proposes a website accessibility project specifically designed to bring our website into full compliance with WCAG 2.2. To achieve this, we will be conducting a thorough review of our council website against the WCAG 2.2 standards. This review will assess our website templates, code structure, written content, and all documents published on the site.
- 1.7 The WCAG review will identify areas for improvement, allowing us to create a more inclusive user experience. Following the review, we will document the necessary website code and template changes for our website provider. They will then undertake the development work and implement the changes on both our test and live website environments.
- 1.8 In parallel with the website code review, our digital services team will be making the necessary accessibility adjustments to all written content and documents published on the website. This will ensure a consistent and accessible experience across all aspects of our online presence.

2. Policy framework implications

- 2.1 The Council's Corporate Business Plan, adopted in October 2022, outlines a commitment to creating a more accessible Borough for all residents. One of the plan's five key themes focuses on "Empowering our Communities," which aligns directly with ensuring our website is inclusive and user friendly for everyone. By conducting a WCAG 2.2 accessibility review and implementing the necessary changes, we can remove online barriers and empower all residents to access Council services and information effectively.
- 2.2 This website accessibility project directly supports the Council's mission to build stronger communities. An accessible website ensures everyone, regardless of ability, can connect with the Council and access the resources they need.

3 Financial implications

- 3.1 The Council's Capital and Investment Strategy, approved in February 2024, included this website accessibility project as a proposed scheme. While Members expressed initial support, a formal report is required to secure final approval to proceed and the allocation of funding.
- 3.2 This report seeks approval from the Corporate Management Committee for the website accessibility project. Approval will release the allocated budget of £10,000, allowing the Council to move forward with essential website upgrades to meet WCAG 2.2 accessibility standards.

4. Legal implications

- 4.1 Local authorities provide information to the public and seek to facilitate the public undertaking various tasks. The use of websites to convey information and allow tasks to be undertaken is a reflection of the way in which modern technology can be used to deliver the dissemination of information and the conducting of activities. The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018 requires that the websites and applications of UK public sector bodies are made more accessible for users, unless doing so would impose a disproportionate burden on the public sector body.
- 4.2 While WCAG 2.2 compliance is not currently a legal mandate in the UK, there is a growing trend of successful legal challenges against organisations with inaccessible websites. These cases increasingly reference WCAG 2.1 or 2.2 as the accessibility benchmark. Non-compliance with WCAG 2.2 exposes the Council to potential legal risk, potentially resulting in claims against the Council and costly settlements.
- 4.3 Investing in WCAG 2.2 compliance is not just the right thing to do, it's a proactive measure that mitigates legal risks and protects the Council from potential financial repercussions.

5. Equality implications

- 5.1 The WCAG 2.2 are a set of internationally recognised recommendations established by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) to ensure web content is accessible to everyone. These guidelines outline specific criteria for creating web content that can be perceived, operated, understood, and navigated by users with a wide range of abilities.
- 5.2 While WCAG 2.2 compliance is essential for ensuring equal access to information and services for people with disabilities, the benefits extend far wider. An accessible website, designed with clear language, intuitive navigation, and multiple content formats, fosters a positive user experience for all residents. This includes users with visual impairments, cognitive disabilities, those using screen readers or assistive technologies, and even users with slower internet connections.
- 5.3 An equalities impact screening assessment was undertaken as part of the original project to procure and implement the Council's new website in 2020. The outcome of this screening assessment was that a full impact assessment was not required at the time.
- 5.4 As part of this project, we will be completing a full equality impact assessment of the Council's website to ensure we capture the gaps against the WCAG 2.2 standards and the steps we are taking to address the shortcomings.

6. Environmental/Sustainability/Biodiversity implications

- 6.1 While the environmental impact of website accessibility upgrades is likely minimal, the long-term benefits are positive. WCAG 2.2 compliance can encourage a shift towards online services, reducing reliance on paper-based processes like documents and forms sent via post. This translates to a decrease in paper usage, printing and associated transportation emissions with postage to the Council.

7. Risk implications

- 7.1 Failing to review and invest in upgrades to achieve WCAG 2.2 compliance for our website exposes the Council to several risks. Firstly, WCAG 2.2 is increasingly cited in legal cases

concerning website accessibility. A non-compliant website could lead to potential legal claims and fines.

- 7.2 Furthermore, a non-accessible website could exclude a significant portion of the population of the Borough. Residents with disabilities rely on websites to access vital Council services and information. This exclusion can damage the Council's public image and erode trust, potentially leading to negative press coverage.
- 7.3 Investing in WCAG 2.2 compliance demonstrates the Council's commitment to inclusivity and good governance, mitigating these risks and fostering a more positive public image.

8. Conclusions

- 8.1 This report recommends the implementation of a website accessibility project to ensure Runnymede Council's website meets the latest Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.2 standards.
- 8.2 By prioritising accessibility, the Council can continue to create a website that is truly inclusive and user-friendly for all residents. A well-designed, accessible website fosters a positive user experience for everyone, fostering greater public trust and satisfaction with the Council's online services.
- 8.3 Furthermore, investing in website accessibility mitigates potential legal risks associated with non-compliance with evolving legal requirements. WCAG 2.2 compliance demonstrates the Council's commitment to inclusivity and good governance, upholding its responsibility to serve all residents equally.

9. Background papers

- None.

10. Appendices

- Appendix 1 – Website Improvements Business Case