

COTHERSTONE PARISH COUNCIL

Parish Council Website and Website Accessibility

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Meeting date 9 September 2020

1. Introduction

The Public Sector Bodies (Website and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018 requires public sector bodies, which includes parish councils, to ensure reasonable adjustments are made to websites to that they are accessible to people with various disabilities. These include:

- Impaired vision
- Motor difficulties
- Cognitive impairments or learning disabilities
- Deafness or impaired hearing.

Gov.uk website states that at least 1 in 5 people in the UK have a long-term illness, impairment or disability; many more have a temporary disability.

From 23 September 2020 all parish council websites will have to comply with the regulations.

2. Standards

Parish councils need to make reasonable adjustments to their websites and operations so that people can access information. They are required to include an accessibility statement on their website setting out to what extent it meets the requirements and what alternative arrangements are available. Good practice would also see councils including a plan to narrow any accessibility gap over time.

The website standards that councils are expected to meet are the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1AA. These are highly technical and voluminous, however most modern parish council websites are likely to be mostly compliant.

Things to check for compliance include:

- Text based content
- Images, video and audio content
- Interactive tools and transactions
- PDFs and other documents
- Technology
- HTML checks.

There are many evaluation/assessment tools available to work through the process.

There are a number of exemptions where online material does not need to meet the WCAG standards, including:

- Pre-recorded audio and video (published before 23 September 2020)
- Live audio and video such as streaming meetings
- Heritage collections such as scanned manuscripts
- PDFs or other documents published before 23 September 2018, unless users need them to use a service
- Maps
- Third party content that's under someone else's control if you did not pay for it or develop it yourself (eg. social media like buttons)
- Content on intranets or extranets published before 23 September 2019, unless there is a major revision after this date

- Archived websites if they're not needed for services the organisation provides and they are not updated.

3. Disproportionate burden

The legislation does describe a disproportionate burden assessment, allowing councils to not comply with the accessibility requirement if doing so would impose a disproportionate burden.

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) advises that a council will not know if changing parts of its website is a disproportionate burden until it has carried out an assessment. An assessment is a legal requirement before any declaration of burden.

An assessment needs to consider:

- The council's size and resources
- The nature of the council's activities (eg. Are certain services aimed at people who are likely to have a disability)
- How much making things accessible would cost and the impact that this would have on the council?
- What the additional benefit to disabled users would be by making changes.

Once the assessment is complete, then the council needs to publish an accessibility statement describing how its website is or is not compliant with the regulations. It is noted that a disproportionate burden will change by definition over time: expensive and cumbersome processes in 2020 may be cheap and swift in 2024. Councils should therefore keep the accessibility statement and assessment under review.

4. Accessibility Statement

Every parish council must provide an accessibility statement on its website and it is recommended that this is published as a webpage rather than a document to download. The statement needs to cover:

- Whether the website is fully, partially or not compliant with accessibility standards
- If it's not fully compliant, which parts do not currently meet accessibility standards and why (eg. they are exempt or it would be a disproportionate burden to fix things)
- How people can get alternatives to content that's not accessible to them
- How to contact the council to report accessibility problems, and a link to the website they can use if they're not happy with the council's response
- Anything else you think is helpful for people to know about, such as plans and work in progress toward greater compliance.

5. Timing

Councils must have a plan of action and an accessibility statement in place by 23 September 2020.

6. Non-compliance

If a council does not comply with the website accessibility regulations, they could receive requests from members of the public for compliant information. If the council fails to provide this, it could be reported to the enforcing body, in this case the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC). NALC's view is that the EHRC would most likely send a letter asking the council to comply. If this is unsuccessful, the council could be requested to develop an action plan to show how it will move towards compliance.

7. Possible action

Government guidance states that 'checking [for accessibility] in detail requires a large amount of technical expertise and is best left to either an accessibility expert within your organisation or a third-party accessibility

auditor ... and that, for some organisations, paying a third party would place a disproportionate burden. In this case, a 'basic check' should be carried out instead ... it's likely that the checks will take at least a few days.

In the past few months, a steady flow of sales promotions from website developers has been received by email. Typically, these offer packages costing several hundred pounds. For example, Nirvanawebstudio.com's "most popular package for Parish Councils' is on offer at £800+VAT, with transfer of existing website contact to new site charged at £25+VAT per hour, and annual support at £299+VAT.

8. Proposed action

The Parish Council's website has received little attention for the past three years at least, other than uploading to it the meeting and agenda papers.

Council agreed early in 2019 to discontinue the agreement with Mark Armstrong for hosting and maintenance of its website and in March 2019 an account was opened with 1&1IONOS for website hosting, domain name (cotherstoneparishcouncil.org.uk) and email provision (clerk@cotherstoneparishcouncil.org.uk).

A reminder of the comparison of costs:

2018-29 (with Mark Armstrong)	£190.74
2019-20 (with introductory offers from 1&1IONOS)	£ 23.92
2020-21 (with 1&1IONOS, no discounts)	£154.00

Rather than assessing and then trying to make the 'old' website compliant with the website accessibility regulations, the suggestion is that this is a timely point to develop a new Parish Council website, and discontinue the 'old' one.

As Clerk I have been working on developing a new website and have presented this to councillors for comment and feedback.

The new website includes the required accessibility statement and efforts will continue to make, and keep, the website fully compliant.

Recommendations

1. To approve the switch from the current hosted website to a newly developed 1&1IONOS hosted website, managed in-house by the Clerk.
2. To note the website accessibility regulations coming into force on 23 September 2020 and the compliance status of the new website.