Summary of the Workshop

eAccessibility for all – from words to action
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Accessibility is the door to open inclusion, active participation and becoming free of the barriers to living life as a normal European citizen. Every day, people with disabilities and many older people face challenges that hamper their daily activity and well-being, with many products and services inaccessible to them. However, solutions do exist and ICT goods and services can help to promote mobility and provide better access to consumer products and services.

eAccessibility is about providing everybody in society an with equal access to goods and services based on ICTs. The European Commission wants that especially public-funded websites in particular will to become more accessible. However, to deliver on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, binding measures with aAccessibility eAccessibility may be needed.

Also, it has become clear that standards and harmonising standards can play an important role in encouraging innovation and improving the market for accessible products and services. CEN, CELENEC and ETSI are currently working on the European Commission's Mandate M/376, which deals with the development of European accessibility requirements for public procurement of products and services in the ICT domain. It requires organisations to comply with a basic standard of accessibility as a pre-condition for public procurement.

Accessible ICT for better mobility

Accessible city services

Demographic changes have an increasing impact on the functioning of cities and have led to the need for additional infrastructures and legislations. Authorities should be aware that improving accessibility must be approached in a coherent way, and not through isolated initiatives, in order to enhance the comfort and quality of life of all citizens. Information, coordination, political commitment and good strategic planning are crucial elements in providing people with disabilities and the elderly access to city services. It is also important to address the problem of standardisation and harmonisation between

different municipalities. Flexibility in standards enables innovations to be effectively matched, but strict standards are much easier to enforce.

Local projects led by the League of Historical and Accessible Cities have improved accessibility in historical towns and serve as a hub for exchanges of best practice and know-how. The emphasis is on informing and rallying different stakeholders (city authorities, local NGOs, etc.) towards a political agreement, removing physical barriers and staff training. ICT instruments also have an important role to play with, for example, smart canes equipped with receptors and GPS systems and standing scooters.

Accessibility is also an on-going process as expectations and technologies evolve rapidly. Other ICT solutions include GPS systems on public transport ("next bus" in the US) and the possibility to locate someone in space with smart phone receptors through signal strength of transmission ("Blue eyes" in the Paris metro). There are a lot of potential innovative solutions but there must be a balance between adapting city infrastructures and providing people with equipment and tools.

Accessible transport services

The fact that not a lot of older people have access to the internet poses a real challenge in making transport services more accessible using ICT: in the United Kingdom (UK), for example, only 29% of adults aged 75 years and over have ever been online, and only 55% of people aged 55 years and over have the internet in the home. The internet is extremely useful in that, often, the best travel and transport information can be found online prior to travelling. With regards to purchasing transport tickets, people with disabilities and older people are at a disadvantage due to the fact that cheaper tickets are generally available online; in addition, self-ticketing machines in stations are difficult to use, and this can discourage people from using transport at all. The fact that most information is only visual also poses a major challenge: 60% of blind people have access to the internet, but are unable to obtain information from websites. In addition, many people do not have the finance or equipment necessary, for example, insurance products are generally expensive, and this can discourage people from taking out travel insurance and travelling in the first place.

There are a number of solutions to these challenges, and it is also important to consider pedestrians, cyclists and private car use in the debate. More flexible and dynamic intelligent transport systems are needed. One solution is Accession GIS, which can measure how far one can travel within a specified time period and can identify neighbourhoods where healthcare and jobs are accessible. For private car use, smarter, more ergonomic and user-friendly vehicles help in keeping people driving for longer, and parking aides and sensors can be a benefit to older people. ICT can also be used in providing real-time information, e.g. informing people on buses or trains what the next stop is, including connections, and what stations are accessible. With regards to physical guidance, textured strips on the floor of public transport vehicles (already a reality in Denmark) could greatly benefit blind people, as would sensors in the white walking stick.

In order to make transport services more accessible to everyone in society, authorities must take responsibility and invest in ICT solutions. People must be trained in the use of ICT, and solutions must focus on people's daily journeys in order to be effective.

Accessible ICT for consumers with disabilities

Accessible banking services

The banking services sector is crucial for social integration, and comes with its share of difficulties for people with disabilities and the elderly. Technological advancements attempt to address the challenges concerning security and user friendliness. In the UK, some people were defrauded because of a security breach in Nat West's "get cash" application. Customers need easier passwords and interfaces to be able to ensure that

they can carry out confidential operations with minimal assistance and maximal confidentiality.

Some user-friendly applications and technologies which enable visually-impaired people to have access to banking services are available. The "LookTel money reader" smartphone application identifies currencies vocally, and the use of VIR for voice action over the telephone provides optimal access to online banking. Vocal applications are also useful for people with problems of dexterity and should be developed further.

The simplification of devices is important to ensure widespread use. Some older people find it difficult to adapt to technology and are reluctant to abandon the cheque system. It can also be argued that there is a tension between accessibility and security. For example, bank statements for blind people are not available online for security purposes and must be printed in braille, which is problematic for banking companies. Technology has an important role to play in this field but, for more efficiency, designers and IT experts should consider accessibility at the beginning of the process rather than concentrating their efforts on adaptation.

Accessible retail services

Accessibility for all is crucial, and the four main criteria to be considered are: safety, affordability, interoperability, and power of choice. A survey carried out recently in the UK found that many shops are inaccessible, not only in terms of physical entry but also in terms of navigating the premises. It is not enough to simply introduce a smaller step or ramp to facilitate entry for people using wheelchairs, but it is important to consider other disabilities as well, for example, blind people are unable to see items on the shelves. One possible solution is the use of Radio Frequency Identification Devices (RFIDs); however, these are very expensive and therefore inaccessible to most people. These devices are currently subsidised by the national health security system in two Member States (Denmark and Switzerland) and two similar programmes are supported by the regulated health service in Germany.

Demographic change means that unrestricted accessibility is becoming a competitive advantage, and making stores freely accessible to as many customers as possible is part of many retailers' strategy. For example, Tesco in the UK has adopted a multi-channel retail approach, allowing people to shop how they wish, be that in-store, online, through their mobile phone or through the Tesco Direct Catalogue. E-commerce is becoming increasingly important, but there are still many challenges to be overcome. For example, complex security steps make online payments more difficult, there is a need to improve customer service and confidence in online shopping, and customers do not always have access to the internet and, if and when they do, they may lack the necessary ICT skills. Another major challenge is that most information is only visual. Manufacturers have begun to recognise this and there are now various smartphone applications which can be used by people with disabilities and older people. Industry leaders must be pushed to act and the EU must work to take legally binding measures in order to enable the market to deliver accessible products and services. However, it is also important to recognise that e-commerce cannot replace shops: there is a need not only for better accessible e-commerce, but also better accessible shops.