



Udruga za podršku  
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VALIDITY



# HANDBOOK

## PROVIDING DISTANT SUPPORT: LIVE CHAT SERVICE

Changing the Accessibility of Tools (CHAT) for Victims

Victim Support Europe

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Victim Support Europe would also like to thank all interview and focus group participants; their input, experiences and suggestions were crucial to the development of recommendations for this Handbook.

### *Note on language used*

This Handbook aims to provide recommendations for professionals working with persons with disabilities who are victims of crime. To that end, it aims to follow both a victim-sensitive, trauma-informed and disability-inclusive approach, recognising the need to empower individuals while providing a tailored response to victimisation.

Understanding that crime can be a traumatic experience, a victim-sensitive approach intends to prioritise minimising secondary victimisation and harm, focuses on victims' safety, empowerment, expressed needs and choices, while ensuring a sensitive, inclusive and empathetic delivery of services and respecting core principles of justice<sup>1</sup>. In line with the 2012 Victims' Rights Directive<sup>2</sup>, a tailored response to victimisation focuses on the identification of victims' needs and the provision of an adequate response to them.

As a result, the language of this Handbook emphasises both the acknowledgement of individual wishes and preferences, as well as identifying and responding to individual needs.

## Executive summary

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<sup>1</sup> Safe justice for victims of crime, Victim Support Europe, 2023, online at: <https://victim-support.eu/publications/safe-justice-for-victims-of-crime-discussion-paper/>

<sup>2</sup> Directive 2012/29/EU of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, online at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012L0029&from=EN>

This Handbook was drafted by Victim Support Europe (VSE) within the context of the *Changing Accessibility of Tools (CHAT) for Victims project*<sup>3</sup>. Victim Support Europe is the largest umbrella organisation advocating for the rights of all victims of all crimes in the European Union. VSE represents 74 national member organisations providing support and information services to over 2 million people affected every year by crime in 35 countries.

The *CHAT for Victims* project was coordinated by the Victims and Witness Service Croatia<sup>4</sup> and aims to enhance access to information and support for persons with disabilities who fall victim to crime. The purpose of the project is to create and implement a live chat service that provides victims with information and support.

Persons with disabilities face many barriers to accessing information and support, not only in-person but also online. In fact, accessibility is a legal requirement within the European Union, intended to ensure that persons with disabilities can access and use services on an equal basis with others, by removing or mitigating the barriers they experience. In practice, however, accessibility is often poorly implemented or misunderstood. This project aims to address some of these challenges with a particular focus on accessibility for people with hearing, sight, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. Ultimately, the goal of the project is to promote inclusion, equality, and non-discrimination, while the publication of this Handbook intends to support organisations wishing to develop their own accessible online chat services.

This Handbook presents service providers with practical guidance and recommendations on developing a live-chat service offering information and support to persons with disabilities who are victims of crime. Its contents are the result of international and national desk research, and consultations (interviews and focus groups) with experts and persons with disabilities conducted by the project partners. Six countries (Belgium, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia, Spain) host the partners organisations: [Victim Support Europe](#), [Victims and Witness Service Croatia](#), [Validity Foundation](#), [Centre for Legal Resources](#), [PIC - Legal Centre for the Protection of Human Rights and Environment](#), and [Official College of Psychology of Madrid](#).

38 interviews and 14 focus groups were held across the participating countries (Croatia, Slovenia, Spain, Romania), and at the international and European level. Interviews were conducted with experts who work with persons with disabilities and/or who use chat services in their work. Focus groups, which included persons with disabilities, collected information about their experiences with online communication and chat services and how to best adapt these services to their disabilities. The research focused on solutions for persons with hearing, sight, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.

From the research carried out by the project partners, it was found that access to support and information could be achieved by a chat service that offered a variety of communication channels, allowing its users to choose their preferred method. These channels could include not only written communication formats but also visual and audio-based mediums (voice messages, pictures, etc). Thus, live-chat accessibility for victims with disabilities could be secured by use of a universal, well designed, application which ensures that users with different sight, hearing, speech, intellectual and cognitive abilities have access to the support they need by means of an online chat service.

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<sup>3</sup> Changing the Accessibility of Tools (CHAT) for Victims, Project Page, online at: <https://victim-support.eu/what-we-do/our-projects/ongoing/chat-for-victims/>

<sup>4</sup> Udruga za podršku žrtvama i svjedocima website: <https://pzs.hr/>

If the service uses a chat box, its webpage should also be readily accessible, in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) and the EU's Web Accessibility Directive<sup>5</sup>, to ensure all users can connect, identify, and enter the chat service via the organisation/service provider's website. Specific accessibility features related to the chat's interface and design that include personal settings of colours, text and fonts, spacing, and textbox format, etc. should be integrated within the service to accommodate individual users.

Communication with victims, including persons with disabilities, should be in line with a trauma-informed and victim-centric approach<sup>6</sup>. When communicating with persons with disabilities in particular, services should adopt an individualised approach to ensure that there are no barriers to effective communication and sharing information.

To ensure the live-chat service is truly accessible to its users, professionals working on the service must be given specific training. Such training should include education on disability etiquette and basic accessibility requirements based on user needs, wishes and preferences to enable effective participation. Training should highlight online communication and how to communicate effectively with users with disabilities using different mediums when necessary, such as sign language or screen readers. Establishing and building trust are particularly important to ensure, and should be a focal point of the training. Finally, to guarantee users' safety and privacy, and to avoid any risks of secondary victimisation, professionals should be made aware of the potential risks and challenges associated with using live-chat and how to mitigate them.

An individualised approach should always be implemented, keeping in mind that different persons have different preferences and experiences, will face different communication barriers, and therefore will have different communication needs. Organisations, who seek to implement better accessibility to their services, should actively consult with and involve persons with disabilities to develop appropriate, useful solutions that respond to their needs<sup>7</sup>.

The recommendations suggested in this Handbook reflect the results of the research and identify practical solutions to facilitate access; however, it should be understood that a one-size-fits-all solution does not exist and organisations should always be ready to update their services and training to match users' needs, wishes and preferences and as new solutions arrive on the market.

## Part 1: Guidelines and standards on providing distant support via live-chat services

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<sup>5</sup> Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies, online at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32016L2102&from=EN>

<sup>6</sup> Transforming how we communicate with victims, Victim Support Europe, 2022, online at: [https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files\\_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims\\_compressed.pdf](https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims_compressed.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

## Introduction

Victims of crime need access to effective information and support in order to facilitate their recovery, exercise their rights, and participate in criminal proceedings<sup>8</sup>. For victims with disabilities, it is important that information and support is accessible and that they can therefore exercise their rights and receive treatment that is equal to what given to others. However, as existing means of information provision and support are often inaccessible, many victims, in particular victims with disabilities, are left without adequate support or information. This makes it challenging for them to obtain information about their case, about legal proceedings, their role and their rights to enable effective participation. Indeed, there are victims, who speak little or not at all for whom helplines would not be an accessible medium to obtain information or support. There may be others who live together with their abusers for whom would be challenging to call for help or support without putting themselves in harm's way. There are also others for whom either physical distance or the need to have reliable manner to transmit evidence to organisations providing victim support is also important.

The creation of a live chat system is meant to help overcome accessibility barriers, such as the described above, by following human rights model of disability found in the UNCRPD. As an additional means for all victims, especially with disability to exercise their rights. As a complimentary measure for organisations providing victim support to facilitate access to information and communication. Including about rights, about their case, about access to different means of support. To accomplish this, its development and deployment needs to reflect the diversity of persons who may wish to use it, factoring in their context, disadvantaged background and personal characteristics, such as disability. The operation of the live chat must also be able to reasonably accommodate to the diverse wishes, will or preference of all victims. This handbook sets out guidelines and guidance on how to do it, especially for victims with disabilities.

After introducing key information about victims' right to information, support, accessibility, and online chat services, the handbook will provide (1) practical recommendations on how to develop a live-chat service accessible to persons with disabilities, (2) guidelines on how to use the chat service to communicate with persons with disabilities, who are victims of crime, and (3) an overview of the key risks and challenges to be addressed by service providers.

### Victims' right to accessible information and support

In the European Union, persons with disabilities have the **right to access information and communication, including through technological devices, in an equal manner to everyone else**<sup>9</sup>. This right is enshrined in the European Union Charter for Fundamental Rights<sup>10</sup> and the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities<sup>11</sup> (CRPD). This right is further explained

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<sup>8</sup> Transforming how we communicate with victims, Victim Support Europe, 2022, online at: [https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files\\_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims\\_compressed.pdf](https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims_compressed.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Web Accessibility, Shaping Europe's Digital Future, European Commission, online at: <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/web-accessibility>

<sup>10</sup> Article 26, 'Integration of persons with disabilities', European Union Charter for Fundamental Rights, 2000, online at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Article 9, 'Accessibility', United Nations Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD), 2006, online at: full reference convention <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/web-accessibility>

and fleshed out in the International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities<sup>12</sup>, which states that:

- Principle 1 *'All persons with disabilities have legal capacity and, therefore, no one shall be denied access to justice on the basis of disability'* – this requires ensuring provision of support and (reasonable) accommodations to enable persons with disabilities be supported in decision-making in matters that affect them;<sup>13</sup>
- Principle 2 *'Facilities and services must be universally accessible to ensure equal access to justice without discrimination of persons with disabilities'* – this entails, among others, that services or facilities used in legal systems must follow the principle of universal design by ensuring accessibility through information and communication, including technologies;

Guidance for the implementation of this right can be found in the EU through the European Disability Strategy and legislation such as the Procurement Directive, the Web Accessibility Directive<sup>14</sup> and the European Accessibility Act<sup>15</sup> as well as international protocols such as the Marrakesh Treaty. EU standards, policies, and resources aim to achieve consistency on how accessibility is achieved and implemented throughout Member States. An increasing number of good practices and resources have been developed over the years to support this harmonisation.

#### *Examples of resources and good practices on web accessibility*

The **W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI)**<sup>16</sup> has integrated their knowledge (on web accessibility, standards, guidelines and experiences of persons with disabilities) within a single online platform. Their resources include generic data on accessibility, guidance for professionals and individuals, courses on digital accessibility, in addition to – among others – check-lists for evaluating a website's compliance with accessibility requirements.

**Inclusion Europe**, an umbrella NGO representing the rights and interests of persons with intellectual disabilities across Europe, has developed **European standards for making information easy to read and understand**<sup>17</sup>. These include standards on written and electronic information (presentation of the homepage, navigation through the website, links, etc).

At the same time, all victims of crime benefit from information rights enshrined in the 2012 EU Victims' Rights Directive<sup>18</sup>; such as the right to access support services for information and support, the right to receive information from first-contact, right to an individual assessment and the right to understand and be understood during criminal proceedings.

<sup>12</sup> International Principles and Guidelines on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities, United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities et al., 2020, online at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2020/10/Access-to-Justice-EN.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> See also Article 2 and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

<sup>14</sup> Directive (EU) 2016/2102 of 26 October 2016 on the accessibility of the websites and mobile applications of public sector bodies, online at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX:32016L2102&from=EN>

<sup>15</sup> Directive (EU) 2019/882 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019L0882>

<sup>16</sup> Accessibility Fundamentals Overview, The W3C Web Accessibility Initiative, online at: <https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/>

<sup>17</sup> Information for all: European standards for making information easy to read and understand, Inclusion Europe, online at: <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read-standards-guidelines/>

<sup>18</sup> Directive 2012/29/EU of 25 October 2012 establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime, online at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32012L0029&from=EN>



In practice, however, many victims with disabilities encounter **barriers in accessing or receiving information**. Platforms, materials and information communicated to victims largely use a complex and legal language, which is not easy to understand; there is a lack of alternative easy-to-read or simple language formats<sup>19</sup>.

Most websites and platforms hosting information online are inaccessible to persons with disabilities. For example, they use multiple pop-ups, saturated colours, lengthy texts, and may be incompatible with various devices (e.g. access from specific web browsers, from a mobile phone or tablet, or from assistive technologies)<sup>20</sup>. As accessibility solutions (e.g. features and options in the structure or design of the interface) are often not integrated in the design or delivery of websites and services, it can be challenging to look for and identify information and help online.

Victims of crime who have disabilities often may not know where to look or who to turn to for information<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, ensuring victims with disabilities can readily access information and support is crucial. Firstly, this ensures that all victims, regardless of their individual needs, wishes, and preferences, can exercise their rights in an equal and non-discriminatory manner. Secondly, the situation of persons with disabilities tend to put them at a higher risk of **violence and crime than persons without disabilities**<sup>22</sup>.

Disability stigma or prejudice can lead to people being discriminated against through hate speech or crime, physical and/or verbal violence, harassment, bullying and/or mobbing. Persons with disability may be dependent on others (family, friends, caregivers, personal or support assistants) to access their rights. Because of this, they are at a higher risk to violence and abuse perpetrated by their carers or professionals (e.g. social care workers, healthcare workers) who come into contact with them<sup>23</sup>, making it hard to access support.

The impact of crime and victimisation felt by a victim can be greater because of lack of accessible channels through which to receive help and information or to report crime, potentially contributing to secondary victimisation or revictimisation<sup>24</sup>.

Support services often represent a **key entry point to information and advice for victims**<sup>25</sup>, whether before reporting a crime, or during criminal proceedings; ensuring equal access to these services allows all victims to receive appropriate support and exercise their rights. Thus, chat services, which offer victims the ability to easily access advice (see section Online support & chat services), should be accessible to all, including persons with disabilities, enabling everyone to access information and support on an equal basis.

### What is accessibility?

Accessibility is a right.<sup>26</sup> It aims to ensure that all users, including persons with disabilities have *'access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information*

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<sup>19</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>20</sup> Desk research and consultations, CHAT for victims project.

<sup>21</sup> Desk research and consultations, CHAT for victims project.

<sup>22</sup> See the 'Humanising Justice' international report from the Voice for Justice project, available at: [International-syntesis-report-EN-new-footnote-220907.pdf](https://www.victim-support.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/International-syntesis-report-EN-new-footnote-220907.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Desk research and consultations, CHAT for victims project.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> National Framework for Comprehensive Victim Support, Victim Support Europe, 2022, online at: [https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files\\_mf/1673427018NationalFrameworkforComprehensiveVictimSupportcompressed.pdf](https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1673427018NationalFrameworkforComprehensiveVictimSupportcompressed.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> Article 9, 'Accessibility', United Nations Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD), 2006.

and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas.<sup>27</sup> It entails an ex ante duty to plan the development of new facilities and services in line with principles of universal design to ensure these are accessible to all.<sup>28</sup>

All persons with a diverse range of hearing, sight, movement, and cognitive abilities, must be able to access information, services and products on an equal basis to all. Accessibility has benefits for all users and is a particular requirement for persons with disabilities; for example, children and young people, non-native language users, people with medical conditions or temporary impairments (e.g. a broken arm can limit a person's navigation abilities), persons with situational limitations (e.g. in an environment where they cannot speak or listen to audio content), persons using varying devices such as smaller screens, smart TVs and watches, mobile phones, etc, and elderly persons with age related impairments<sup>29</sup>.

Web accessibility can be defined as:

*'When websites, tools, and technologies are designed and developed so that people with disabilities can use them. More specifically, people can:*

- ✓ *perceive, understand, navigate, and interact with the Web*
- ✓ *contribute to the Web*<sup>30</sup>

Accessibility can be ensured through the implementation of technical requirements, including the ones defined in European standards. Multimodality is a key measure to achieve universal design, allowing users to choose whichever channels, format or mode for communication (text, images, audio, multimedia) they prefer or need. By providing as many formats as possible, a wide variety of user preferences can be met.

### Online support & chat services

**Online support** refers to *'support, information and/or intervention at a distance provided via the Internet by a professional, either in a synchronous way or not, with one or more users'*<sup>31</sup>. Chat services are an important means of implementing online support, along with email, video calls (via Skype, Zoom), online forms and blogs, social media channels, and peer support groups, etc.

A live-chat service refers to a chat system which is integrated within a website, and through which a user can 'speak' with a professional or an automated system. Live-chat services, as with other internet-based and distant channels of support, have become more popular recently due to diversification of support methods via the internet and ICT technologies. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the development and implementation of distance and online support channels, due to sanitary and health restrictions imposed by governmental authorities.

*Example of chat services in victim support organisations*

<sup>27</sup> Article 9, 'Accessibility', United Nations Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD), 2006, online at: full reference convention <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/web-accessibility>

<sup>28</sup> See General Comment no. 2, Article 9, Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Introduction to Accessibility, W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), online at: <https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/accessibility-intro/>

<sup>31</sup> TALK Handbook – Online support for victims of crime, Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV), 2017, online at: [https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook\\_TALK.pdf](https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook_TALK.pdf)

In **Croatia**, following an increase in the number of requests for information and help through online social media channels, the Victims and Witness Service (*Udruga za podršku žrtvama i svjedocima*)<sup>32</sup> launched a live-chat service for victims of crime in 2022. In addition to emotional support, the organisation offers practical and legal information, as well as legal advice, to victims and witnesses of crime and misdemeanours; users may also be referred to relevant civil society organisations and institutions. The chat was established to broaden the availability of services to victims and witnesses, including younger people, with different communication needs and preferences.

Using live-chat as a service provision for victims of crime has a number of **advantages**. Victims and professionals highlighted that chat services allow victims to connect with the services from a distance, when they are physically unable to seek help or information, and when they are unable to speak (e.g. in a workplace, or in a space shared with the perpetrator, especially in cases of domestic violence). The privacy and anonymity offered by a chat service provides victims with a feeling of safety and helps them regain a sense of control.

Live-chat allows victims to seek help from professionals without having to reveal their emotions, which can motivate some victims to come forward. Others may prefer written to oral communication as it can be less intimidating than speaking over the phone or in person, especially at first contact. Chat services also offer better accessibility with its written communication format, and allow a more equitable access to information for persons who experience difficulties in expressing themselves and in communicating verbally because of their use of sign language or lip reading, as well as language or speech-related impairments.

“The screen can protect us in some way, especially if we are anonymous. People can talk more openly and can have the impression that others focus more on what they are saying rather than their disability.”<sup>33</sup>

Chat services and other forms of online support are often seen as being **complementary to other channels** and means of support. Interestingly, victim support experts and organisation representatives who used chat services professionally, noted that most chat users do not look for support through other channels (e.g. helplines or in-person support). This confirms the importance of diversifying channels of support to be able to include different groups of users. In many cases, chat services are a victim’s point of first-contact; victims who have not yet reported the crime and who are looking for information, e.g. confirmation about the crime and victimisation. Conversely, other forms of support are mainly used by victims who have already had first-contact with law enforcement and/or have already reported the crime<sup>34</sup>.

Communication by means of chat services can, however, present challenges for both victims and service providers. Some people with disabilities struggle or are unable to read and write. Others prefer different ways to communicate. Therefore, alternative formats are key. For many users, the written format and absence of nonverbal cues (e.g. voice tone, facial expression) make it difficult for users to interpret, respond to, and express emotion. All the service professional’s skills and abilities are needed to identify and respond to the users’ needs.

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<sup>32</sup> *Udruga za podršku žrtvama i svjedocima* website: <https://pzs.hr/>

<sup>33</sup> Quote from a participant with disabilities, in a focus group in Croatia, CHAT for Victims project.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews and focus groups, CHAT for Victims project.

## 1. Developing an accessible live-chat service

In order to provide a live-chat service which is accessible to persons with disabilities, in particular persons with hearing, sight, intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, the interface of the chat service must be designed and operated in ways that take account of web accessibility standards and good practices.

This first section will detail recommendations related to general accessibility principles, the user experience (UX) and graphical design, followed by a second section with advice on how to use the chat, and the skills and training to be developed. Service providers working on the accessibility of their chat service should seek to involve persons with disabilities as much as possible in this process as this will ensure that the service is developed in an inclusive and effective way.

### 1.1. General accessibility principles

There are some general principles set out in international and European law which establish the framework within which a service, such as the live chat support for victims with disabilities, is developed and operated. Such principles are increasingly incorporated into the provision of services, in particular through technology such as web based and digital platforms. In addition, accessibility and assistive measures are more routinely included in a range of digital devices such as mobile phones, smart watches, computers, and tablets.

#### **□ Universal design**

Ideally, the development of any accessible live-chat service should be based on the broad principles of **universal design** as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities:

*‘Universal design means the design of products, environments, programmes and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.’<sup>35</sup>*

Key principles for universal design include the following<sup>36</sup>:

- Principle 1: Equitable, meaning the design can be used by persons with different abilities;
- Principle 2: Flexible in use, meaning that the design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities;
- Principle 3: Simple and intuitive, meaning the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills or level of concentration;
- Principle 4: Obvious information, meaning the design effectively conveys the required information to the user, regardless of environmental conditions or the user’s sensory capabilities;
- Principle 5: Tolerance for error, meaning the design minimises risks and adverse consequences of unintended or accidental actions;
- Principle 6: Minimal physical effort, meaning the design can be used comfortably and efficiently while reducing fatigue;
- Principle 7: Size and space for approach and use, meaning that it provides adequate size and space for approach, reach, manipulation and use, regardless of the user’s body size, posture or mobility.

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<sup>35</sup> Article 2 ‘Definitions’, United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD), online at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities/article-2-definitions.html>

<sup>36</sup> The 7 Principles of Universal Design, National Disability Authority, 2020, online at: <https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/>

At its core, universal design aims to ensure that the service is accessible to every user, including but not limited to persons with disabilities. Applying these principles also means that accessibility should be integrated within all general services, rather than developing separate services that are accessible to persons with disabilities.

Similarly, the EU Accessibility Act<sup>37</sup> sets out general principles in the European Union for accessibility, to uphold the obligations of the UN CRPD. The general principles for services (see paragraph 47 and Annex 1, Section III of the Act) are set out to ensure that the service is:

Perceivable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information is available via more than one sensory channel;</li> <li>- Written information is presented using fonts of adequate size, sufficient contrast, adequate spacing between letters, words, lines and paragraphs;</li> </ul>
Operable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interface must be navigable;</li> <li>- Compatible with assistive devices;</li> <li>- Visual elements are presented with flexible magnification, contrast and brightness, with options for improving visual clarity;</li> </ul>
Understandable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information is understandable;</li> <li>- There is information about the accessibility of the service;</li> </ul>
Robust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- content must be robust enough to be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies</li> </ul>

The European Accessibility Act also requires that eligible services are provided in multiple modes to ensure they can be used by people with: limited vision, no vision, limited hearing, no hearing, no vocal capacity, limited colour perception, limited physical reach or strength, limited cognition. While the European Accessibility Act does not apply directly to the development of online live-chat services, its requirements should be adopted as good practices guiding the development of accessible services.

#### ***□ Flexible and responsive approach***

While universal design and the general principles of the European Accessibility Act provide a framework for the development and operation of a chat service for victims with disabilities, it is equally important that a flexible and responsible approach is adopted. An approach that prioritises guiding principles and their requirements rather than one that simply provides a blueprint which may not be suitable for different contexts. For example, organisations may need to review and modify existing systems to enhance accessibility.

More specifically this means that:

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<sup>37</sup> Please note that the European Accessibility Act does not apply directly to the development of live-chat services such as the one developed under this project. However, its principles developed to uphold the UN CRPD provide a framework and good practices to help ensure that accessibility can be achieved. For more information on the European Accessibility Act scope, please consult: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32019L0882>

- Services should be developed, tested, and evaluated in **partnership with persons with disabilities**, self-advocates and with organisations of persons with disabilities. In this way the service can be developed in ways that ensure accessibility within the national context and existing services. At the same time, such an approach helps to ensure that there is awareness, commitment and trust with communities of persons with disabilities, who will be using the service.
- The service should be developed with **accessibility and individualisation** at its heart. It could be that full accessibility is not feasible from the launch of a chat service, but, as the service develops over time, more accessibility options can be included. If the technology and digital platform do not already include the potential for increasing accessibility, then this will not be an option as the service develops. It should be possible to individualise the accessibility options to respond to the personal needs and preferences of users.
- The service should be **sustainable** and provided by organisations which are trusted by persons with disabilities. Again, this helps to embed the service as a reliable and trusted addition to any existing support provided. It may take some time for people to be aware of the service to make use of it, so it is important that there is a commitment to providing the service over a longer period.
- Professionals need to be trained and supported in their roles in providing information and support through the chat. A live chat service requires **skilled and informed staff** in addition to the technological requirements.

This sets out some of the general principles and also some of the specific considerations when developing a live chat service for persons with disabilities, the next sections provide more detailed and practical guidelines on the development and provision of the service.

## 1.2. Developing and implementing the chat service

Facilitating access to live-chat depends on the user knowing where and how to access the chat box website. Thus, the **chat box website or platform should be readily accessible** by persons with varying voice, sight, hearing, intellectual and cognitive disabilities, and it should comply with a variety of accessibility requirements<sup>38</sup>. EU standards on harmonisation across Member States have given birth to various good practices and useful resources that support the implementation of website accessibility.

### *10 Web Accessibility Rules (W3 WAI)*

The Web Accessibility Initiative has resulted in **10 Web Accessibility Rules<sup>39</sup> that support service developers and organisations in making their websites accessible to all users**. They include:

1. Text and non-text elements (images, multimedia) used together to convey the same information;
2. Organise and structure to facilitate webpage or document navigation;
3. Instructions should not depend on a single sense (eg. colours, shapes, directions);
4. Keyboard access should be ensured for all options and functionalities;
5. Give users time to read text and perform tasks at their own pace;
6. Do not create content that interferes with access to other parts of the document;

<sup>38</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> 10 Web Accessibility Rules, European Disability Forum, online at: <https://www.edf-fehp.org/publications/10-web-accessibility-rules/>

7. Use descriptive headings and identify the purpose of hyperlinks to facilitate how documents and websites are structured and navigated;
8. Consistency in use of visual design allows for easier to use interfaces;
9. Avoid user errors by appropriately labelling form fields and explaining errors in data entry, and their correction;
10. Test your content with assistive technologies.

#### *Guidelines on Digital Accessibility (Croatia)*

The **Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNET)** has developed guidelines on the digital accessibility of online websites<sup>40</sup>. The guidelines allow public sector bodies and other users to evaluate their platform's user accessibility and compliance with the European accessibility requirements under the Web Accessibility Directive. They address the basic principles of digital accessibility and offer targeted recommendations for a variety of user groups: digital accessibility for visually impaired persons, for persons with hearing impairments and with learning disabilities, among others.

Other authorities have created web accessibility certificates (see, for example, [NSIOS](#) in Slovenia) and/or basic check-lists that evaluate a website's accessibility level (for example [Easy Checks – A First Review of Web Accessibility](#)<sup>41</sup> by the WAI), and platforms that automatically evaluate a website's URL (see: [The Access Monitor](#)<sup>42</sup>).

#### *Perceivable*

When entering a chat-integrated website, **access to the chat should be clearly visible**. Users should be able to go to the chat using shortcuts that involve minimal clicks. As pop-up windows, i.e. webpages or boxes that appear automatically, may be confusing and difficult to navigate – especially with sight, concentration or psychosocial disabilities – they should be avoided<sup>43</sup>. The actual chat-box should be clearly marked in such a way that it is clearly distinguishable from the rest of the website; this is especially important for persons who are colour blind and/or have visual impairments.

#### *Operable*

##### *AI sign-language tools*

Increasingly, automatic and/or artificial-intelligence (AI) based systems are being developed and used to facilitate access to sign-language. In the United Kingdom, *Signapse*<sup>44</sup> develops solutions using AI techniques to automatically translate website content, and other information, into British Sign Language. Similarly, SLAIT<sup>45</sup> offers signs-to-text and speech-to-text translations that can be used in online communications such as video calls. Ultimately, these tools aim to simplify communications and access to information by persons with disabilities and those who communicate with them.

<sup>40</sup> *Smjernice za osiguravanje digitalne pristupačnosti*, Croatian Academic and Research Network (CARNET), 2020, online at: <https://www.carnet.hr/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Smjernice-pristupac%CC%8Cnosti.pdf>

<sup>41</sup> *Easy Checks – A First Review of Web Accessibility*, The W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI), online at: <https://www.w3.org/WAI/test-evaluate/preliminary/>

<sup>42</sup> The Access Monitor, Government of Portugal, online at: <https://accessmonitor.acessibilidade.gov.pt/>

<sup>43</sup> Information for all: European standards for making information easy to read and understand, Inclusion Europe, online at: <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read-standards-guidelines/>

<sup>44</sup> Signapse, website online at: <https://www.signapse.ai/>

<sup>45</sup> SLAIT, website online at: <https://slait.ai/>

Chat box users should be able to **readily identify the text box** where messages can be exchanged with support staff. Live interaction with a support worker – who should welcome the user, identify themselves and go over the chat’s conditions of use and privacy – should be clearly indicated before messaging commences<sup>46</sup>.

Staff answering chat messages should collect and accommodate to **information about users’ communication needs, will and preferences** as soon as possible; thus, allowing for more effective support and information provision. Chat support staff should ask about communication needs and preferences, giving the opportunity for the chat user to respond either immediately before entering the chat or while messaging on the chat service.

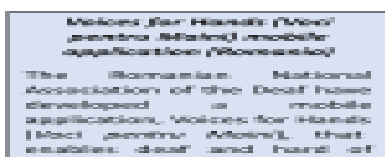
**Visual or intuitive messages** can be used to initiate conversations with a user. For example, the user could be asked about the crime or what advice is sought; (no more than two) response options could be chosen. The dialogue should be brief, easy to understand, and ideally include visuals (pictures/videos) with captions (and sign language). An ‘other’ option should also be available to allow users submit their own messages.

In some cases, the chat service may work to specific opening times; therefore, an **automated message** must let users know when staff will next be available, encourage users to come back, and provide any other important information (e.g. in emergency situations).

### *Understandable*

A service provider’s website should clearly display information on the chat’s conditions of use, including its confidentiality, anonymity, and accessibility specifications; all of which should promote a feeling of safety for the user. The purpose of and services provided by the chat should also be explained in clear easy to understand terms that highlight the confidentiality of any discussions and the users’ anonymity.

At the end of the chat discussion, service providers should offer to provide a copy (via a downloadable file, and/or email) of the discussion. This would allow users to refer back to the information exchange to ensure they are able to make good use of the support information provided. Chat system should also enable users to easily resume a past conversation.



### *Practical considerations on accessibility*

There are a number of practices and tools which are commonly used, or asked for, by persons with disabilities to ensure accessibility in chat services, and many of these were raised and discussed in the interviews and focus groups.

Chat accessibility can be enhanced by modifying the interface and its design. In line with the CHAT for Victims project specific objectives and methodology (see the Executive Summary), the following recommendations are grouped by disabilities covered in

the research, with the understanding that solutions refer to the most common types of barriers met by users of each groups. Some modifications may apply to more than one user categories.

<sup>46</sup> TALK Handbook – Online support for victims of crime, Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV), 2017, online at: [https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook\\_TALK.pdf](https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook_TALK.pdf)



General website accessibility guidelines, such as the WAI 10 Web Accessibility Rules (see section 1.1. General recommendations), should be referred to when developing chat options. The recommendations below, giving suggestions for specific disability groups, aim to support such guidelines.

☒ **Accessibility for persons who are blind and persons with vision impairments**

The chat and interface design should be kept as simple as possible for all persons with vision impairments. The chat room should offer at least one non-visual option for blind users (e.g. audio) in addition to enhancement features for users with limited vision<sup>47</sup>. Suggestions on how to adapt the chat design to these needs can be found below, while recommendations on compatibility with assistive technologies, such as screen readers, are presented in 1.4. Compatibility with external communication tools and devices.

Accessibility design	Recommendations
<b>Chat box</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Zoom enhancement options should be available, wherever entry to the chat is located. These can be used to enlarge the content, increase the text size, or adjust the screen resolution;</li> <li>- The chat box should be able to expand to fill the screen;</li> <li>- Group all options and features close to the chat box for greater visibility and ease of access;</li> <li>- For simplicity of use, limit the number of options, additions or features related to the chat. Too many options may negatively impact screen reader compatibility (see section <u>1.4. Compatibility with external communication tools and devices</u>);</li> <li>- Adopt features that distinguish messages written by the user and by chat staff: colours, and/or lines separating the messages;</li> <li>- Offer voice messaging (when sending and listening to text), which may be particularly useful for blind persons who have difficulty in using a keyboard. Staff should be encouraged to deliver information in clear brief sentences to avoid misunderstandings. In anonymous live-chat systems, options and mechanisms distorting the recorded voice or concealing the user’s identity should be used.</li> </ul>
<b>Audio and visual accessibility</b>	<p>Colours:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Limit the number of colours used and avoid combinations of red and green;</li> <li>- Contrast the colours used, specifically between the colour of the text and its background. Two options – at least – should be offered, a light and a dark theme, with highly contrasting colours<sup>48</sup>;</li> <li>- The user must be able to adjust the colour contrast;</li> <li>- The user should be able to modify the background and text colours.</li> </ul>

<sup>47</sup> Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services (EN 301 549 V3.2.1 (2021-03)), ETSI et al, online at: [https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi\\_en/301500\\_301599/301549/03.02.01\\_60/en\\_301549v030201p.pdf](https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi_en/301500_301599/301549/03.02.01_60/en_301549v030201p.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

	<p>Text and fonts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Use sans serif text fonts, users have identified 'Arial' as being the most accessible font;</li> <li>- 12 pt, or greater, print font is recommended;</li> <li>- Adjustments to the font size (up to 200%), colour and type should be possible;</li> <li>- Line spacing should be a minimum of 1.5 or 2.00 pts;</li> <li>- Italics, especially in longer passages, should be avoided. Use the bold option for emphasis when needed.;</li> <li>- Align text to the left margin<sup>49</sup>.</li> </ul> <p>Audio:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When sharing videos, include description narration, which describes the visual content and information that the main soundtrack does not cover<sup>50</sup>;</li> </ul>
<b>Navigation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Messages may be sent by using the keyboard's 'Enter' button rather than clicking a button next to the chat box;</li> <li>- Scroll bar visibility should be guaranteed to enable users navigate the chat box without relying on the cursor to find them;</li> <li>- Features converting text into speech should be enabled;</li> <li>- Any links shared in the chat box should be large enough to click on easily;</li> <li>- Each description, button, and image should have an alternative text label; each item should correspond visually to its label.</li> </ul>

**Accessibility for persons who are deaf and hard of hearing**

For persons who are deaf or hard of hearing, modifications – such as sign language – can be adopted to ensure accessibility meets users' communication needs.

Accessibility design	Recommendations
<b>Chat box</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clear separation of messages between the user and the service provider: as above, utilising bullet points, separating lines, or contrasting colours.</li> </ul>
<b>Audio and visual accessibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sign language options should be available: users and professionals have access to pre-recorded (with subtitles and closed captions<sup>51</sup>) FAQs<sup>52</sup> and their replies;</li> <li>- Video calling, supported by a sign language interpreter, should be available. However, service providers should employ solutions to ensure user anonymity, users' faces may – for example – be hidden from interpreters' view. Joining a video call should be as simple as clicking on a link;</li> </ul>

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>51</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>52</sup> Frequently Asked Questions

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shared audio content should offer enhancement options, i.e. reduced background noise, improved audio clarity<sup>53</sup>;</li> <li>- Visual (video) or auditory (voice message) content should be made available using alternative communication means, such as subtitles or transcripts;</li> <li>- Using pictures and drawings in conversations with users is recommended.</li> </ul>
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**Accessibility for persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities**

For persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities, chat box navigation calls for the use of specific features, which are complemented by visual and auditory options, to avoid users misunderstanding the information provided.

Type of adjustment	Recommendations
<b>Chat box and Navigation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Access to and navigation around the chat box webpage should require as few clicks as possible;</li> <li>- Pop-ups (ie. webpages or information boxes that appear spontaneously) should be avoided on the chat box webpage, as they can be confusing or difficult to follow<sup>54</sup>;</li> <li>- Animation, images or videos, image carousels, and other moving or fast changing items should be avoided;</li> <li>- Spelling aids and predictive text can support a variety of writing abilities<sup>55</sup>. Chat box staff should be encouraged to ask users for clarification where text seems incoherent, due to possible predictive text errors;</li> <li>- Users should not have to move the page from left to right to read the text;</li> <li>- Users should be able to scroll across the conversation, to reread it as required.</li> </ul>
<b>Audio and visual accessibility</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Text should be in an easy-to-read format, which allows for colour contrast between the text and background, and sans serif fonts (Arial, Tahoma) will ensure letters are clearly visible<sup>56</sup>;</li> <li>- Modifications to the font type and colours, and line spacing should be possible;</li> <li>- Italics and the use of all capital letters or special writing designs (shadow, underlining text) should be avoided<sup>57</sup>. If text must be emphasised, use of the bold option is preferred;</li> <li>- 12 pt or greater font should be used;</li> <li>- All text should be aligned to the left, large space between words can make justified text more difficult to read<sup>58</sup>;</li> </ul>

<sup>53</sup> Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services (EN 301 549 V3.2.1 (2021-03)), ETSI et al, online at: [https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi\\_en/301500\\_301599/301549/03.02.01\\_60/en\\_301549v030201p.pdf](https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi_en/301500_301599/301549/03.02.01_60/en_301549v030201p.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> Information for all: European standards for making information easy to read and understand, Inclusion Europe, online at: <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read-standards-guidelines/>

<sup>55</sup> Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services (EN 301 549 V3.2.1 (2021-03)), ETSI et al, online at: [https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi\\_en/301500\\_301599/301549/03.02.01\\_60/en\\_301549v030201p.pdf](https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi_en/301500_301599/301549/03.02.01_60/en_301549v030201p.pdf)

<sup>56</sup> Information for all: European standards for making information easy to read and understand, Inclusion Europe, online at: <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read-standards-guidelines/>

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

- Avoid using narrow margins within the text box, as it makes the written word look cramped<sup>59</sup>;
- Adjust the amount of information visible in the chat box, offer the option of framing large amounts of text. For example, persons with short-term memory issues may find small text boxes to be challenging;
- Usage of pictures, drawings and symbols is encouraged when presenting large amounts of (or complex) information;
- The visual and auditory solutions for sight impairment can also benefit persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities. Using sounds or clear brief voice messages can make information more accessible and easier to understand.

### *10 factsheets on cognitive accessibility (Spain)*

In 2023, in cooperation with the Spanish Ministry of Social Affairs, the State Reference Centre for Personal Autonomy and Technical Assistance (CEAPAT) published a series of 10 factsheets on cognitive accessibility<sup>60</sup>. These provide information, guidelines, and recommendations on a range of topics that include Plain Language, Easy Reading, Product and Service Design, Interaction with Technology, and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC).

#### *□ Other recommendations*

There were a number of other recommendations that were raised during the research which should be considered when developing a chat service:

- The latest versions of some browsers and operating systems, such as Google Chrome, may exclude users who do not have access to recent technologies; thus, the use of new features supported by such versions should be avoided.
- Chat functions should include the option of saving a conversation as a file, which may be printed and emailed if necessary. This is useful for anyone who wishes to review the information provided during the exchange.
- Other chat options may include the creation of a user profile; users can upload information on their communication preferences and needs, and alternative contact information (e.g. phone number). Only those wishing to be identified would be advised to take advantage of this option and the chat provider should appropriately address all risks related to their possible identification and sharing of information/data.
- As noted above, Inclusion Europe recommends developing a website or chat service in conjunction with input from persons with disabilities. Their European standards for making information easy to read and understand<sup>61</sup>, provide an example of how users' views, communication preferences and needs, and feedback can help service development.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> 10 fichas sobre la accesibilidad cognitiva por derecho, CEAPAT, online at : [https://ceapat.imserso.es/publicaciones/informe-publicacion/-/asset\\_publisher/jbbrNfLTBpz/content/10-fichas-sobre-la-acesibilidad-cognitiva-por-derecho/20123](https://ceapat.imserso.es/publicaciones/informe-publicacion/-/asset_publisher/jbbrNfLTBpz/content/10-fichas-sobre-la-acesibilidad-cognitiva-por-derecho/20123)

<sup>61</sup> Information for all: European standards for making information easy to read and understand, Inclusion Europe, online at: <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read-standards-guidelines/>

### 1.3. Compatibility with external communication tools and devices

Ensuring chat service accessibility requires ensuring its compatibility with external devices: computers/laptops, mobile devices, Assistive Technologies (ATs), and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) technologies.

A chat service should be accessible via and adapted to all platforms, from CPU desktops to mobile devices (smartphones, tablets). Experts highlighted that **mobile devices** are increasingly more popular with users, who can benefit from the various accessible mobile applications they offer (calling, writing, audio and video recordings, images etc).

Providers should therefore consider offering a mobile version of the service. As most users are familiar with functions such as WhatsApp, chat should be accessible via all well-known applications.

#### *WhatsApp: an accessible mobile app and a communication channel*

Focus group participants<sup>62</sup> often mentioned WhatsApp as a good practice accessible communication tool. Features that were highlighted are:

- Accessible design, specifically the message display;
- Colour options available to meet users' needs and preferences;
- Clearly and readily identified messages from different individuals;
- Voice messaging option;
- Speech to text and/or text to speech options;
- Compatibility with screen readers: on entering WhatsApp, the reader focuses on the text box; when a new message is received, the reader immediately sees its content, and when and by whom it was sent.
- The app's features and options are appropriately marked and explained (for instance, 'voice message', 'send an emoji', 'send a picture or file');
- When focus is on the text box, users are invited to 'Write a message'.

The app was thought to be both useful and accessible, especially by participants who are deaf or hard of hearing as well as persons who are blind or experience sight impairments. However, some other groups (persons with autism) found the channel to be less accessible due to unstructured messaging, and few cognitive and visual cues separating conversations; furthermore, the continuous exposure to notifications and conversations were found to be stressful. Any communication channel should therefore be chosen with a view to the user's individual needs and preferences.

If users employ **Assistive Technologies (AT)** (products, equipment, and systems that enhance learning, working, and daily living for persons with disabilities<sup>63</sup>), their compatibility with chat services must be verified. Once compatibility is ensured, users will easily be able to access the chat in a manner that is adapted to their needs.

European requirements on the accessibility of ICT products and services state that users should not have to use such assistive technologies to connect with available services<sup>64</sup>. Chat service developers and providers do not require users to acquire ATs to gain access to their services; thus, individuals

<sup>62</sup> National desk research report for Croatia, CHAT for victims project.

<sup>63</sup> 'What is AT?', Assistive Technology Industry Association, online at: <https://www.atia.org/home/at-resources/what-is-at/>

<sup>64</sup> Accessibility requirements for ICT products and services (EN 301 549 V3.2.1 (2021-03)), ETSI et al, online at: [https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi\\_en/301500\\_301599/301549/03.02.01\\_60/en\\_301549v030201p.pdf](https://www.etsi.org/deliver/etsi_en/301500_301599/301549/03.02.01_60/en_301549v030201p.pdf)

who cannot afford ATs as well as persons with disabilities that cannot be fully enhanced by ATs are able to use chat services.

Compatibility with ATs, in particular screen readers, can be achieved by:

- Developing and adapting the chat box website to AT accessibility requirements will ensure that users working with ATs and screen readers can successfully navigate through to the chat box. This includes modifications such as screen reader accessible headings and using alternative text for pictures (more website accessibility recommendations can be found in section [1.2. Connecting to the chat](#));
- Ensuring chat navigation and functions are accessible through the keyboard;
- Indicating that the responder (chat staff) is typing a reply; through an audio cue (similar to the Facebook Messenger mobile app), a visual cue (lights or pulsing chat box), or a verbal cue once a screen reader is connected ('the other person is typing ...');
- Informing the user, once a screen reader is connected, as to who sent the message and when, before it is read out loud;
- Omitting dashes, and entering spaces instead, allows a screen reader or other device to differentiate a phone number from other numbers. Phone numbers shared on a chat should include a direct call option through a clickable link;
- Limiting the number of options, additions or features available on the chat, to simplify both the appearance of the chat box and its usage. Too many options may negatively impact compatibility with a screen reader;
- Avoiding PDF documents, which may be incompatible with screen readers, when sharing documents or resources with users. However, accessible PDFs are available but require modifications to be made to the device; an accessible PDF includes 'a reading order, structure tags and headings, and document settings (such as language)' which allow ATs to process them<sup>65</sup>.

In addition to ATs, a chat service should be compatible with **Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) tools**. AAC tools can be either technology- or non-technology-based products. Non-technology-based products include non-electronic boards or books using images which are selected by the individual to convey messages (e.g. pictures and symbols, alphabet boards). Technology-based products use software and hardware to produce a visual output which is digitally displayed through messages or voice outputs; for example, mobile applications that use pictures boards to display messages<sup>66</sup>. To ensure access for persons with speech disabilities, for whom audio or video-based solutions are not appropriate, chat services must be compatible with AACs.

**Services must be compatible with sign language**, which is the primary language for many persons who are deaf and hard of hearing. Video call options can be offered in the chat in addition to a direct link to sign-language interpretation services. The chat may also host sign-language videos offering information on victims' rights and available services; access to language interpretation services may be required for users whose sign-language 'mother tongue' is not that of the chat service provider. Organisations that provide victim support may have to facilitate sign-language service provision with appropriate interpreters for these users.

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<sup>65</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>66</sup> Ficha 6. Comunicación Aumentativa y Alternativa, Serie "10 fichas sobre la accesibilidad cognitiva por derecho", CEAPAT, online at: [https://ceapat.imserso.es/documents/20123/758147/2023\\_acc\\_cog\\_06\\_com\\_aumentativa\\_alternativa.pdf/272e0f2a-2d87-a222-34bd-e3965a39494e?t=1681461121182](https://ceapat.imserso.es/documents/20123/758147/2023_acc_cog_06_com_aumentativa_alternativa.pdf/272e0f2a-2d87-a222-34bd-e3965a39494e?t=1681461121182)

#### 1.4. Promoting the chat service

The research collected advice on promoting the live-chat service to raise awareness for users, including those with disabilities. Recommendations focused on use of a **visually recognisable identity**, such as a logo associated with the service.

Promotional activities (campaigns, dissemination of information materials, etc.) should **target platforms that are readily accessed by persons with disabilities**. The message, and the means chosen to promote it, should be delivered effectively to the target audience, which should be as inclusive as possible<sup>67</sup>. Information materials should be published in a variety of formats, including easy-to-read written information, and video – with subtitles and sign-language – and audio formats.

Feedback from persons with disabilities highlights that readily accessing appropriate information and support is hampered by not knowing where to look for such information, and an inherent lack of trust in support services. Promotional activities should also **be carried out by organisations and services working with and for persons with disabilities**, eg. national support networks should work with service providers to share information on existing chat services and on the development of trust.

Other promotional channels include the media (radio, TV, social media, etc.), social and public services, and other stakeholders involved in the care of persons with disabilities (eg. healthcare sector).

## 2. Communication guidelines and skills: the provision of information and support to persons with disabilities through a chat service

Communication with victims of crime must adopt a victim-centred, trauma-informed approach in order to provide the emotional and practical support needed. There are additional considerations when communicating through an online chat platform and when communicating with victims with disabilities. Communicating effectively with persons with disabilities requires familiarity and training in the particular barriers and experiences that affect persons with disabilities, in disability etiquette, and the use of language. In general, and as has been emphasised in this handbook, a personal approach is essential, and seeking first to understand the needs and constraints of the individual is critical.

It is always important to use respectful language and to avoid stereotyping people, whatever their circumstances and whether they have a disability or not. The United Nations have published guidelines on disability-inclusive language which can be helpful to refer to (see Annex 1: Disability-inclusive language guidelines<sup>68</sup>). Professionals working in support services for persons with disabilities can adopt a range of skills to enhance their communication with clients. Best practice training helps professionals acquire these skills, which in turn can impact future accessibility to support services for those who need it. The guidelines below set out recommendations for both online and generic communication with persons with disabilities and are based on a victim-centred, trauma informed approach.

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<sup>67</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>68</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

## 2.1. Communicating with persons with disabilities

Recognising that every individual's preferred means or mode of communication and communication needs depend on their circumstances and the medium of communication used. The recommendations below aim to provide general guidance on communicating with persons with disabilities which affect their ability to use online chat.

To establish a respectful rapport and to build an atmosphere of trust, always speak directly with persons with disabilities. On some occasions, and with some individuals, a caregiver, interpreter, or relative who is with them may provide communication assistance<sup>69</sup>. Avoid assumptions and ask the person to explain what they may need, and how they wish, to communicate with you, in line with an individualised approach<sup>70</sup>. Maintain and ensure confidentiality at all times.

Be concise in both your language and when asking questions, always use language that the chat user can immediately understand. Consider using short uncomplicated sentences using the active voice and straightforward vocabulary<sup>71,72</sup>. Do not hesitate to reformulate your text and give examples to illustrate what you are saying<sup>73</sup>. Speak or write clearly and provide context to the discussion; this can be particularly important for persons who are blind and have visual impairments who may require verbal descriptions of a physical setting, and persons who are deaf and have hearing impairments who may require translation of verbal communication into forms that they can understand.

Be honest and do not hesitate to ask questions if you did not understand the information provided or are uncertain as to how to proceed. Be patient, recognise that it might take time for the person to formulate their ideas<sup>74</sup>. Adapt the pace of the conversation to the person's needs and preferences.

Recognise that you may have to adapt how you ask questions to suit the individual you are working with. Open-ended questions can facilitate engagement and discussion, and expressions of opinion. However, if working with persons who have cognitive difficulties, closed-ended questions should be prioritised as to facilitate the communication. Suggestive and leading questions should always be avoided. Show that you understand what the person is saying and that you are actively listening, e.g. in a face-to-face conversation, using nonverbal cues such as nodding affirmatively<sup>75</sup>.

## 2.2. General skills for online communication

Due to the nature and format of the channel, communication will have to be adapted to individual users' preferences or needs when holding a conversation via an online service.

Research collected general information on the provision of information and support using online and live-chat services. While this section cannot detail all topics contained within a training programme, it will highlight key recommendations that should be considered when developing training courses

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<sup>69</sup> Disability – Inclusive Communication Guidelines, United Nations Department of Global Communications et al, 2022, online at: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un\\_disability-inclusive\\_communication\\_guidelines.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_disability-inclusive_communication_guidelines.pdf)

<sup>70</sup> Better communication, People with disability, Queensland Government (Australia), online at: <https://www.qld.gov.au/disability/community/communicating>

<sup>71</sup> *Lenguaje claro, Serie "10 fichas sobre la accesibilidad cognitiva por derecho"*, Government of Spain, online at: [https://ceapat.imsero.es/documents/20123/758147/2023\\_acc\\_cog\\_02\\_lenguaje\\_claro.pdf/c5a98ee1-b435-9ef3-c5fb-ed65d44f22cf?t=1681461190373](https://ceapat.imsero.es/documents/20123/758147/2023_acc_cog_02_lenguaje_claro.pdf/c5a98ee1-b435-9ef3-c5fb-ed65d44f22cf?t=1681461190373)

<sup>72</sup> 'What is plain language', Plainlanguage.gov, online at: <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/about/definitions/>

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Люди с ограниченными умственными способностями: как общаться и как освещать сюжеты о них*, Keystone Moldova Association, 2018, online at: <https://www.keystonemoldova.md/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2020/08/Guide-for-journalists-Ru.pdf>

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*



for chat service staff. The recommendations apply not only to communication with all chat users, but especially for communicating online with persons with disabilities.

Chat communication with persons with disabilities should be adopt **an individualised approach**. This will ensure that communication with victims with disabilities are in line with their personal wishes, needs, will and preferences for support and information. Victim support workers will then be better prepared to respond to different requests, which may relate to, for example, the nature of the crime, their circumstances, their social networks, their experience with the authorities, their available resources, etc. will impact their needs and preferences.

All communication from service staff to chat user should be **concise and easy to understand**. Particular attention should be paid to the use of punctuation which, in the absence of nonverbal cues, may lead to misunderstandings if used incorrectly or which, if complex characters are used, may confuse the meaning of the sentence<sup>76</sup>.

**Soft skills and effective written communication training** is crucial to the development of expertise required by chat service staff. Effective communication is the process by which two or more people send and receive messages and ideas using verbal and nonverbal means, including speech, writing, signs, and behaviours. Communication is considered effective when a message, idea or emotion is successfully transmitted and effectively understood by the person receiving it<sup>77</sup>. In an online written communication format, the absence of key nonverbal signs and behaviours (such as the tone of voice, body language, and facial expressions), that represent up to 93% of our communication<sup>78</sup>, can impact the interpretation of a user's emotional state, thoughts, and level of stress<sup>79</sup>. Training in effective written communication will enable chat service staff to convey their thoughts and to encourage users to do the same.

Empathy, which is linked to effective communication, is defined as '*understanding a person from his or her frame of reference rather than one's own, or vicariously experiencing that person's feelings, perceptions and thoughts*'<sup>80</sup>. By allowing individuals to recognise and respond to the emotions of others, empathy can be used in building trust and is fundamental to communicating with victims of crime<sup>81</sup>. In the absence of key nonverbal indicators in written online communication formats, understanding **how to express and convey empathy in a written form** is a training requirement for individuals working on a chat service.

The absence of nonverbal cues represents the biggest challenge to written online communication (see section 3. **Risks and challenges when providing information and support through a chat service**). Although professionals can use specific techniques to support conversations and demonstrate their presence to the user. These techniques include, non-exhaustively<sup>82</sup>:

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<sup>76</sup> TALK Handbook – Online support for victims of crime, Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV), 2017, online at: [https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook\\_TALK.pdf](https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook_TALK.pdf)

<sup>77</sup> Transforming how we communicate with victims, Victim Support Europe, 2022, online at: [https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files\\_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims\\_compressed.pdf](https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims_compressed.pdf)

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> TALK Handbook – Online support for victims of crime, Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV), 2017, online at: [https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook\\_TALK.pdf](https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook_TALK.pdf)

<sup>80</sup> 'Empathy', American Psychology Association Dictionary, online at: <https://dictionary.apa.org/empathy>

<sup>81</sup> Transforming how we communicate with victims, Victim Support Europe, 2022, online at: [https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files\\_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims\\_compressed.pdf](https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims_compressed.pdf)

<sup>82</sup> TALK Handbook – Online support for victims of crime, Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV), 2017, online at: [https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook\\_TALK.pdf](https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook_TALK.pdf)

- Emotional bracketing: the insertion of an emotional state in the message, between brackets, for example '[I am a bit concerned]';
- Descriptive imagery: describing one's environment to strengthen the connection with the user and increasing the physical feeling of presence;
- Spacing and pacing: using punctuation, spacing and sentence structures to manage the pace of online communication, structure the message, and focus the attention of the user.

These techniques take into consideration an individual's preferences and needs, as they may not be suitable for all users.

While emojis and GIFs can support the expression of emotions and context, they should be used carefully, depending on the user's communication skills and needs; misunderstandings and confusion must be avoided at all cost.

Live-chat staff must understand **how to structure a conversation**. Service provider focus groups suggest that conversations should be slow paced; conversations last for an average of 20 minutes<sup>83</sup>, which is longer than a phone call or other distant support means. Service staff must understand the chat's characteristics, its rhythm and pace. The formulation of follow-up sentences, assuring victims staff are online, and the time taken to read longer messages extend the length of the conversation. As mentioned above, short sentences and questions – to facilitate and encourage engagement and communication – are recommended. Questions should be asked one by one, responders then have the opportunity to digest and understand the question. Victims with disabilities may need more time to read and/or reply to chat messages.

**Confidentiality rules** should also be a focus of training for chat service staff working with victims of crime. For example, where there is an obligation or an option for professionals to report certain high-risk situations (such as repeat victimisation, self-harm, harm to others) or specific crimes (such as violence against children), clear protocols and structures should be in place to facilitate the process and avoid confusion.

Training should always include **mental-first aid (PFA) and suicide awareness training**, to help staff identify signs of distress, risks of self-harm and suicide, and understand how to react to them. Victim support workers and experts highlighted that such training is important as serious mental health issues (such as depression, anxiety, crisis situations, self-harm and suicide risks) are more often raised on chat services than other channels of victim support. The absence of verbal or physical cues makes it more difficult to identify the user's emotional state when using a written communication format, hence the need to conduct in-depth training on this topic.

Several other **key differences in interaction with victims using a chat service and victims using helplines** (such as the European 116 006 helpline for victims of crime) were identified by victim support workers and experts. For example, users of chat services are on average younger than those using phone services / helplines or asking for in-person support. Due to its format, chat users may ignore or skip over (parts of) questions asked by the support workers, this is less likely to happen during a phone or face-to-face conversation. The tempo of a chat conversation is seen to be different, with regular and longer pauses, e.g. with users taking a break, thinking how to reply, or leaving the room for a few minutes.

***APHVF/SPAVO: training on information provision and support by live-chat services (Cyprus)***

<sup>83</sup> Desk research and interviews with professionals, CHAT for victims project.

The Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (APHVF/SPAVO)<sup>84</sup> operates a live-chat service for victims of domestic violence. Training for service operators lasts 2 to 3 days and covers topics ranging from the online delivery of services to a live-chat intervention model, the provision of information and support via live-chat service, crisis management in the live-chat service, expected results, difficulties and risks, and other important topics, i.e. intersectionality issues. Training also includes case studies and role-playing from the perspective of both the professional and the user. A key training topic focuses on conveying empathy through written communication.

### 2.3. Guidelines and advice for communicating with victims with disabilities through a chat service

During a chat conversation with a user with disabilities, universal communication guidelines and reasonable or procedural accommodations should be applied by service providers to facilitate the users' understanding of information provided and to ensure the quality of the service provided. The guidelines should be integrated within training programmes for service staff who will work on the live-chat service.

#### □ *General recommendations*

All communication guidelines should encourage a respectful, victim-sensitive and trauma-informed approach to create a safe supportive environment for victims looking information and help by means of a chat service. Basic principles should always be followed when communicating with victims<sup>85</sup>:

1. Show respect
2. Ensure safety
3. Allow emotional expression
4. Provide appropriate information

To adapt communication to a user's will, preferences or needs and to follow an individualised approach, best practice recommendations suggest that the individual is asked to state their communication preferences, and whether there is anything the service provider should be aware of during the conversation.

**Plain language** is recommended for all chat communication, and is particularly relevant for communicating with persons with intellectual disabilities. Easy-to-understand language used in short sentences is suggested when working with victims of crimes; the impact and trauma of crime may impede the absorption of information and victims may need time to understand and reflect on what they are told and what they read<sup>86</sup>.

The use of **simple language, short paragraphs and concise sentences** is helpful when communicating with chat users. While **the language and vocabulary** used may be adapted to meet each individual's needs and preferences, during the chat conversation the support worker should regularly check that the user understands the information provided to them. If not, alternative ways of communicating

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<sup>84</sup> Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family website: <https://domviolence.org.cy/en/>

<sup>85</sup> Transforming how we communicate with victims, Victim Support Europe, 2022, online at: [https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files\\_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims\\_compressed.pdf](https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims_compressed.pdf)

<sup>86</sup> Transforming how we communicate with victims, Victim Support Europe, 2022, online at: [https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files\\_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims\\_compressed.pdf](https://victim-support.eu/wp-content/files_mf/1681918001TransformingHowWeCommunicateWithVictims_compressed.pdf)

the message should be used; re-phrasing/re-explaining with simpler language, using visual and/or audio means (pictures, pictograms, videos, voice messages).

Ideally, service providers should stop talking/writing while the user is writing, no matter how long it takes. They should also avoid asking for additional information while the user is dealing with a question; this may interfere with the user's concentration; clarification or further details can always be asked afterwards.

Organisations providing services through live-chat should develop **accompanying materials** – on their rights as victims, on services provided by their organisations and other available services, etc. – that can be shared with chat users. For accessibility by all users, no matter what their needs, such materials should be available in **easy-to-read language and in multiple formats**.

Experts highlighted that, when communicating online with persons who are blind or who have sight impairments or with persons who are deaf or who have intellectual disabilities, it can be important to **explain the context in which the communication is taking place**. A chat conversation may include explaining to the user that they are entering the chat service, that there is a box in which they can write their text, the other communication means available (voice messages, images/pictograms, sign-language interpreter or videos, etc.) as applicable.

Attention should be paid to the **barriers persons with specific disabilities can experience** when using written chat conversations. For instance, grammatical differences between sign language and standard language mean that some persons who are deaf/hard of hearing and who speak sign language as their primary language and standard language as a secondary language, find it difficult to write and understand standard language. However, persons who are deaf/hard of hearing but who use standard as their primary language and sign language as a secondary one will be more at ease with communicating in standard language.

*ATENPRO's accessibility for victims of gender-based violence with hearing impairments (Spain)*

ATENPRO<sup>87</sup> provides information and assistance to women victims of gender violence. The inclusion of the SOTA Modul<sup>88</sup> (Teleassistance Module for Deaf Persons) in their service enables accessibility for victims who have hearing impairments. The text messaging application uses a system of dialogue with pre-determined questions and answers which the user can select, in addition to writing their own text. The Call Centre also uses the SoTA Modul which, when implemented on the phone line, allows the user to communicate via text messages and pre-determined questions while the handler hears the victim via the phone line audio.

Experts also noted the importance of **building trust** with victims seeking support via the chat service. Victims with disabilities may have negative and even traumatic experiences with certain professionals and authorities, and victim support service support staff should be aware of such barriers to trust that some persons with disabilities have. This can be a particular issue if the service is part of the same system as the authorities with which victims have already had negative experiences (law enforcement, justice system, etc.).

<sup>87</sup> ATENPRO: Servicio Telefónico de Atención y Protección a las víctimas de la violencia de género <https://violenciagenero.igualdad.gob.es/gl/informacionUtil/recursos/servicioTecnico/home.htm>

<sup>88</sup> Módulo de Teleasistencia a Personas Sordas (SoTA), ATENPRO : Servicio Telefónico de Atención y Protección a las víctimas de la violencia de género, online at : <https://violenciagenero.igualdad.gob.es/informacionUtil/recursos/servicioTecnico/docs/DossierSOTA2013.pdf>

Professionals working on a live-chat service should be trained on and be **familiar with the chat's interface and features**, specifically **multi-channel communications** integrated into the chat (e.g. audio and visual features and channels). Staff should also be aware of when and how to adapt the features for users with different needs and preferences.

#### □ *Additional considerations for effective communication*

There are some particular considerations which are important when communicating using specific tools and accessibility measures, which are outlined below:

#### **Sign language and written communication for people who are deaf or hard of hearing:**

Written text and sign language may both be good options when communicating with people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Staff should be trained in how to communicate using sign language or working with a sign language interpreter. Similarly, there are some specific considerations when communicating in writing with people who are deaf or hard of hearing:

- Written texts should be as concise as possible;
- Written communication style should be adapted to suit the individual. Persons who primarily use sign language will use a different grammatical format. Staff should be trained to recognise these differences and to respond in a format that will be understood by the user (see example below);
- Grammar specific to the national language should be researched and included in training programmes so staff can communicate in a language that is understood by the user. For example, in Croatian, the subject of the sentence should always be included when writing to someone whose first language is sign language;
- Avoid the use of abbreviations and acronyms, these may be difficult to understand.

#### **Easy read and plain language communication:**

There is growing recognition of the value of easy read (or easy to read) materials for communicating with and providing information to persons with intellectual disabilities. Inclusion Europe provide guidance on how to produce easy read documents and include a number of examples on their website. Equally, plain language is helpful in all communications and is a good basis from which to start communicating with anyone, and can be a starting point for learning about preparing easy read materials. Some basic guidance is:

- Plain language should be used for written communication, ie. language that can be understood on first reading.
- Sentences should be short, using readily understood vocabulary, and should be written in the active voice<sup>89</sup>;
- Keep the sentences short by describing only one idea per sentence; do not continue on after 'and' or a coma<sup>91</sup>;
- If complex words must be used by the professional, these should always be clearly explained<sup>92</sup>;
- Keep the punctuation simple and avoid the use of complex characters (such as / &) whenever possible<sup>93</sup>;

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<sup>89</sup> *Lenguaje claro, Serie "10 fichas sobre la accesibilidad cognitiva por derecho"*, Government of Spain, online at: [https://ceapat.imserso.es/documents/20123/758147/2023\\_acc\\_cog\\_02\\_lenguaje\\_claro.pdf/c5a98ee1-b435-9ef3-c5fb-ed65d44f22cf?t=1681461190373](https://ceapat.imserso.es/documents/20123/758147/2023_acc_cog_02_lenguaje_claro.pdf/c5a98ee1-b435-9ef3-c5fb-ed65d44f22cf?t=1681461190373)

<sup>90</sup> 'What is plain language', Plainlanguage.gov, online at: <https://www.plainlanguage.gov/about/definitions/>

<sup>91</sup> Information for all: European standards for making information easy to read and understand, Inclusion Europe, online at: <https://www.inclusion-europe.eu/easy-to-read-standards-guidelines/>

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

- Highlight important information, e.g. by using bold text<sup>94</sup>;
- Pronouns (I/him/her/it) should be used cautiously; clarify whom the pronoun refers to<sup>95</sup>;

### 3. Risks and challenges when providing information and support through a chat service

Several key risks and challenges should be considered when preparing and implementing an engagement strategy to provide information and support to persons with disabilities on a live-chat service.

The **absence of nonverbal signs and behaviours** (see section 2.2. General skills for online communication), which ensure successful interventions, represents the most important risk to online written communication<sup>96</sup>. Not only is there a risk of misunderstanding or inaccurately interpreting the dialogue between user and service worker<sup>97</sup>, there is also a risk of secondary victimisation.

The absence of such nonverbal signs can make it **difficult for support workers to assess the victims' emotional state and what support may be needed**. This risk must be addressed through the provision of specific and targeted training on written communication, in particular conveying and identifying empathy in the written form (see section 2.2. General skills for online communication).

Communication mishaps prevent not only **conveying trust and empathy but also building trust**. Distrust is prevalent among victims in general. It may be especially prevalent among victims with disabilities, who may distrust persons they do not know or authorities due to the historical personal experiences or disadvantaged background.

Building trust with service users is critical for the success of the support system. The dissemination of clear information on the services, addressing concerns about potential data breaches or misinformation, can help address such perceptions. Sources of funding, moving away from any reliance on government funds, can also help potential users differentiate between victim support and governmental systems.

Difficulties are encountered by **repeat chat users**, i.e. users that reconnect to the chat several times. Due to the nature of the live-chat service, which relies on anonymity, there are no guarantees that a repeat user will be able to talk to the same counsellor. This requires the victim to not only create a relationship with another counsellor, which can impact trust building and discourage them from receiving the information and support they needed, it also puts the victim in danger of repeat victimisation from having to retell their story. Service providers should seek to address this risk, which can impact users' willingness to access the chat service. However, strategies can be put in place; for example, service providers can encourage victims to save their chat conversation and provide it to the next support worker, thus avoiding having to repeat the same information again.

As mentioned above (see section 2.2. General skills for online communication), serious mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, crisis situations, self-harm and suicide risks, are more often discussed on chat services than other channels of support. Risks that relate to the emergence of **high risks cases**, i.e. suicidal person, imminent danger or repeated victimisation, should be addressed through the development of appropriate organisational protocols and procedures.

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> TALK Handbook – Online support for victims of crime, Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV), 2017, online at: [https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/vootheme/PDF/Handbook\\_TALK.pdf](https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/vootheme/PDF/Handbook_TALK.pdf)

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

Due to the high intensity of live-chat services, its longer conversations and the severe mental health issues that can be discussed, **effective staff support systems and protocols** should be available for professionals working on the chat. Such systems can include post-case emotional support and internal communication channels for live-chat service support workers.

**The safety of victims** using the chat must be a priority. While the online written format enables victims to connect to the service when they are unable to talk, but may be in the same space as their perpetrator, conversations may be viewed or accessed by others (the perpetrator, family/friends, hackers, etc)<sup>98</sup>. This could be highly dangerous for a victim, and risks repeated victimisation and violence if the perpetrator finds out the victim was seeking help. The chat box website and the chat box itself should provide **'Quick exit'** buttons for the personal safety of the victim. These buttons, found on most victim support websites, automatically close the window when clicked; they also delete browser history records.

To address these risks, chat service providers should clearly define policies and protocols around users' **anonymity, confidentiality and data protection**. Protocols and policies will include decisions as to whether data and chat conversations should be recorded and kept, for how long, and under what circumstances they may be shared with external authorities, e.g. the police, as per national law and regulations. Victims should be clearly informed as to when the service would be obliged to breach confidentiality and inform external stakeholders (e.g. imminent risk to the victim's physical integrity or that of others), through the chat's terms and conditions<sup>99</sup>.

At the start of a chat conversation, the professional must ensure that the victim able to safely receive information and support, by checking where the victim is, what device is being used to access the chat, whether there is a risk that a third party could monitor the chat, and whether there are alternative contact options<sup>100</sup>.

**Data protection** is also an important element of the chat service. When implementing external features or add-ons, which aim to enhance accessibility of the chat, e.g. text-to-speech add-on, no data or information from the chat conversation should be accessible from outside the service; discussions contain very personal and sensitive information and must not be shared with external third parties.

As an online communication tool, there is a potential risk from **technical issues** that may be experienced during a chat conversation, e.g. due to the instability of internet connection, which can impact service implementation and support provision<sup>101</sup>. Service providers should anticipate this type of incident and warn the user that this could happen.

Finally, the greatest disadvantage of online communication tools is that they risk **excluding certain population groups**. This is particularly the case for persons with disabilities, who are at risk of exclusion because of barriers in accessing and using ICT technologies, acquiring tools adapted to their needs, the high cost of usage and maintenance, dependencies on others or on external assistive technologies for using ICT technologies<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>98</sup> TALK Handbook – Online support for victims of crime, Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV), 2017, online at: [https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook\\_TALK.pdf](https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook_TALK.pdf)

<sup>99</sup> TALK Handbook – Online support for victims of crime, Associação Portuguesa de Apoio à Vítima (APAV), 2017, online at: [https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook\\_TALK.pdf](https://apav.pt/publiproj/images/yootheme/PDF/Handbook_TALK.pdf).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> National desk research reports, Chat for victims project.

## Annex 1: Disability-inclusive language guidelines

The United Nations has published guidelines on the use of language and terminology in relation to disability.

There are five basic principles which are summarised below.

1. Use people-first language – for example ‘persons with disabilities’, person with a visual impairment.
2. Avoid labels and stereotypes – notably, persons with disabilities have the same range of skills and abilities as everyone else, and are no more heroic or courageous.
3. Do not use condescending euphemisms – for example, do not use ‘differently abled’.
4. Disability is not an illness or a problem – people with disabilities should not be pitied or consider as ‘sufferers’ or ‘victims’.
5. Use proper language in oral and informal speech – always use respectful terms and avoid referring to individuals as synonymous with a disability.

For more information see: <https://www.ungeneva.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/Disability-Inclusive-Language-Guidelines.pdf>

Recommended terms	Terms to avoid
<b>Person with disability</b> <b>Person with [type of impairment]</b> <b>Persons with disabilities</b> <b>People with disabilities (only in easy-to-read documents, informal text, and oral speech)</b>	Disabled person, handicapped, person with special needs, handicap able, atypical, person living with a disability, differently abled, people of all abilities, people of determination, those with disabilities



<b>Person(s) without impairment Broader population</b>	Normal, healthy, able-bodied, typical, whole, of sound body/mind
<b>With disability/impairment/condition</b>	Suffer from, afflicted by, stricken by, troubled with, affected by
<b>Person with an intellectual disability Person with an intellectual impairment</b>	Retarded, simple, slow, afflicted, brain-damaged, intellectually challenged, subnormal, of unsound mind, feeble-minded, mentally handicapped, mentally retarded
<b>Person with a psychosocial disability</b>	Insane, crazy, maniac, psycho, hypersensitive, lunatic, demented, panicked, agitated, mentally deranged, mentally ill, person with mental health problems
<b>Deaf person Person who is deaf Person with a hearing disability Person with a hearing impairment Person with hearing loss Hard-of-hearing person Deafblind person</b>	The deaf, hearing impaired, deaf and dumb, deaf and mute
<b>Blind person Person who is blind Person with a vision/visual disability Person with a vision/visual impairment Person with low vision Deafblind person</b>	The blind, partially sighted
<b>Person with a physical disability Person with a physical impairment</b>	Crippled, invalid, deformed, lame, handicapped, physically challenged, person with physical limitations, limp, person with physical difficulty, home-bound, bedridden
<b>Wheelchair user Person who uses a wheelchair Person with a mobility disability Person with a mobility impairment Person using a mobility device</b>	Confined/restricted to a wheelchair; wheelchair-bound
<b>Person of short stature Little person Person with achondroplasia (only if the person has this condition)</b>	Midget, dwarf, stunted
<b>Person with Down syndrome Person with trisomy-21</b>	Mongoloid, special person, Down
<b>Person with albinism</b>	Albino
<b>Person affected by leprosy</b>	Leper, leprosy patient
<b>Person who uses a communication device Person who uses an alternative method of communication</b>	Non-verbal, cannot talk
<b>Accessible parking Parking reserved for persons with disabilities Accessible bathroom</b>	Disabled/handicapped parking Handicapped bathroom Handicapped friendly building

Source: UN Office at Geneva, [Disability-Inclusive Language Guidelines](#) and [UN Disability-Inclusive Communications Guidelines](#).