

# EBU Members' Newsletter 2024

## Number three, March.

## Our campaigns

After a provisional agreement was reached between the European Parliament and the EU Council negotiators on the proposed Directive establishing a **European Disability Card and European Parking Card** for persons with disabilities, we sent an assessment of this result to our membership and invited questions. A provisional agreement was also reached on the parallel proposal, to extend the rules to third country nationals. We issued a [press release](https://www.euroblind.org/sites/default/files/documents/Press%20Release_Good%20hand%20of%20cards%20for%20persons%20with%20disabilities%20on%20the%20move%20from%202028.pdf) to welcome a landmark development, urging the legislator to formally adopt the new legislation as a package before the European elections of June – something which we have learned risks not happening due to a backlog in translations.

We participated in the EU **Disability Platform Plenary** of 18 March. Noteworthy is the following:

* It was good news to hear from the Belgian Presidency of the EU that the Equal Treatment Directive proposal is still being considered, after 16 years, even if “the text is likely to change a lot”. An eventual briefing to disabled peoples organisations on the state of play was asked for.
* Many deliverables of the Disability Employment Package are ready or being finalised – see further below.
* It is acknowledged that the impact of artificial intelligence on assistive technologies needs to be more ambitiously addressed in the EU Disability Rights Strategy.

We also participated in the **Belgian Presidency of the EU conference** of 19 March, in the framework of the EU Disability Platform, “Towards full inclusion of persons with disabilities – the European Pillar of Social Rights and beyond”. Some highlights:

* About the European Disability Card initiative, it was interesting to hear some Member States recognise the interest of having some EU-level unified principles for the assessment of disability; and the Commission warn about the importance of controlling the implementation and interpretation of the future directive. We brought our message about the missed opportunity to address the gap in transition when moving one’s residence to another Member State, and it was nice to hear it echoed by the European Trade Union Confederation. We asked the Commission to address this important remaining gap for the equal treatment in the EU mobility of persons with disabilities.
* Regarding employment, a representative of the EPSCO Council welcomed the new Disability Employment Gap indicator as a factor of new prominence of this matter in their work, while pointing at persistent inconsistencies in data on employment at EU level. For our part, we ask for data to be further disaggregated by type of disability, to reflect the specific situation of visually impaired people. To-date, the available data distinguishing by type of functional limitation is essentially just to quantify the respective types of limitations and their seriousness, whereas disability is generally treated as a whole when considering the different aspects of life.
* About the European Accessibility Act, we pointed out that it leaves out many products and services, especially in the real world, such as urban transport, household appliances, the labelling of food products, and the built environment – all aspects that matter a lot in the daily lives of BPS people. Importantly, the Commission clarified that, for the EU to address accessibility through legislation, there needs to be evidence of barriers/ distortions in the EU single market due to the absence of harmonisation in this area.
* Concerning the rest of the Disability Strategy 2021-2030, EDF called for action that makes a difference for persons with disabilities, e.g., a Disability Employment and Skills Guarantee, as new flagship initiative. The Commission, for its part, flagged 2025 as a key year to link policies and reforms to funding, due to the EU’s Multiannual Financial Framework.

We attended the European Commission DG Employment and Social Affairs Civil Society Seminar on the priorities for the **European Semester** (12 March). Our key message there was to use this framework to push EU the concerned Member States to drop the so-called “disability benefits trap”, i.e., the loss of such benefits in case of paid employment. This was also repeated at the Belgian Presidency conference mentioned above.

We also attended the European Economic and Social Committee’s Civil Society Week - panel "Towards a **Digital Transformation** that leaves no one behind" (6 March) and its Permanent Group on disability Rights public hearing on "Potential and challenges of **Assistive Technology and AI** on the life of persons with disabilities" (14 March), to bring the perspective of visually impaired persons.

An agreement was found on the **Artificial Intelligence Act**. The text includes important accessibility requirements for persons with disabilities, but falls short of fully protecting fundamental rights. See the European Disability Forum’s [analysis](https://edri.org/our-work/council-to-vote-on-eu-ai-act-whats-at-stake/).

Following the circulation of the EBU recommendations for accessible **payment terminals**, we met with two industry representatives: the European Payments Council and with Payments Europe. The latter meeting was more useful and will lead to continued liaison. We also received useful feedback from the European Commission’s service in charge of payment systems and services.

On 5 March, the European Court of Justice delivered an important [ruling](https://curia.europa.eu/jcms/upload/docs/application/pdf/2024-03/cp240041en.pdf) about **standardisation**, to say that there is an overriding public interest justifying the free disclosure to the concerned NGOs of the requested harmonised standards. ANEC, the consumer voice in European standardisation commented as follows: “While it is too soon to envisage what the practical consequences will be, we can already welcome the ECJ ruling which is stressing, again, that harmonised standards form part of EU law and thus that, according to the principles of the rule of law, transparency, openness and good governance, there is a right to access to harmonised standards, in line with ANEC’s position.”

We alerted a European Parliament rapporteur on the Directive on **pharmaceutical products, about labelling**, to the importance of ensuring that the QR code is easily accessible and detectable for blind consumers.

We attended a joint BEUC (European consumer organisations) and AGE (the voice of elderly people in Europe) on the future **digital euro**, and we liaised with them, in follow-up, with two experts respectively from Estonia and Spain, on accessibility issues.

We provided input for an EDF training session on accessible **tourism**, with the help of our German and Italian members.

We take this opportunity to inform our membership of the progress so far on deliverables, under the EU Disability Rights Strategy 2021-2030, for the **Disability Employment Package**:

* Practitioner [toolkit](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8505&furtherPubs=yes) on strengthening Public Employment Services (PES) to improve the labour market outcomes of persons with disabilities
* [Catalogue](https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8570&furtherPubs=yes) of positive actions to encourage the hiring of persons with disabilities and combating stereotypes
* CEDEFOP [briefing note](https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/9186_en.pdf) on lifelong guidance for persons with disabilities, to improve education, training and labour market outcomes for persons with disabilities

EBU has also actively contributed, within the European Disability Platform’s subgroup Employment, to the Commission’s guide on reasonable accommodation at work (upcoming).

Also part of the Strategy, on the front of **political participation**, is the Commission’s Guide of good electoral practices in Member States addressing the participation of citizens with disabilities in the electoral process – now available [here](https://commission.europa.eu/document/66b9212e-e9b0-409d-88a3-c0e505a5e670_en) – which well incorporates the recommendations from our Accessible Voting Awareness-raising project report.

## EBU’s 40th Anniversary Brochure can be made available in your national language

As part of the celebration of our four decades of existence, EBU has launched a [brochure featuring our main achievements throughout our 40-year history](https://www.euroblind.org/sites/default/files/documents/EBU-card-40-years-anniversary.pdf). This includes our advocacy work in areas such as the Marrakesh Treaty, the European Accessibility Act or the promotion of Braille. We have also underlined several demands in key areas for visually impaired people in Europe in order to build a more accessible and inclusive society.

In the context of our 40th Anniversary, we would like to ask if you would be interested in having the brochure available in your national language. If so, let us know, so that we can plan the graphic design stage. Once your requested has been accepted, we would send you the original text in English so you can provide us with the translation. EBU will cover the cost of having the brochure laid out in your language, for you to use.

The deadline for requests is 12th April 2024. Please note, as the budget is not unlimited requests will be dealt with on a first-come first served basis. If this is of interest, please send us a message at [nacho.lopez@euroblind.org](mailto:nacho.lopez@euroblind.org)

## Ireland - WebAIM screen reader survey reveals interesting results

The WebAIM Screen Reader User Survey released its findings last week, Over 1,500 people took part in the study, which was conducted between December 2023 and January 2024.

We had a look at the results and the most interesting findings showed a growing use of the NVDA screen reader among PC users and Apple’s iPhone remaining the top smartphone of choice for respondents. JAWS maintained its position as the primary desktop and laptop screen reader for 40.5% of survey respondents despite experiencing a slight drop in usage in favor of NVDA which now serves as the primary tool for 37.7% of people who responded to the survey.

Interestingly, the preference for screen readers varies geographically, with JAWS leading in North America and Australia, while NVDA finds its stronghold in Europe, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, again the free screen reader outpaces JAWS in overall usage, so it is official NVDA is now more popular in Europe then JAWS, at least as far as this survey is concerned.

VoiceOver on Mac usage remained steady at 9.7%. The survey also showed that people are using screen readers more on mobile devices with 91.3% using screen readers on such devices, with VoiceOver being the most popular at 70.6%.

The survey highlighted captcha as a major hurdle for users, illustrating the ongoing struggle to find the right balance between security and accessibility. This issue becomes particularly apparent during the sign-up process for services or social media platforms, such as Discord, where captcha poses a barrier. However, once users overcome this obstacle and complete the sign-up process, the overall experience tends to be positive.

Another free open-source screen reader that made it into the survey is Orca for Linux, but this looks to be more of a niche product rather than mainstream as it is only used by a little over 2% of respondents but even fewer responded to say they were using Fusion which is a mix of JAWS and ZoomText. We do know from experience that Fusion is a popular program for users in the workplace but may not be as popular for home use.

Overall, I think the survey shows that free and open software seems to be catching up with paid offers. There might be other reasons for this too such as price and the improvements in built-in screen readers such as Narrator for Windows and VoiceOver for Mac. All the same, it is interesting to see the trends going towards NVDA and it looks like people are comfortable to at least try it out and use it for their primary screen reader.

For now, personally, I still prefer JAWS with the NVDA screen reader coming in a close 2nd place.

by Joe Lonergan

## Spain - ONCE Social Group: ‘Right to accessible vote

The lack of accessibility is one of the main barriers to exercise the right to vote of persons with disabilities. To prevent his, the ONCE Social Group has worked on intense advocacy and political action to ensure the right to vote of persons with disabilities is protected, as part of its campaign “**Right to accessible vote: equal right to vote**”.

Given the fact that accessible technology can put an end to this situation, the ONCE Social Group has identified the QR code system on ballots as the main proposal to protect the right to vote, due to its versatility, ease of use and low cost. This code allows the incorporation of an additional layer of accessibility to the way of exercising the right to vote, complementing accessibility measures already established, such as the braille voting system, thus allowing access for people not familiar with this system.

The upcoming European Union parliamentary elections, to be held from the 6th to the 9th of June, 2024, set the frame and context to call for the need to implement accessibility measures in the electoral process, and protect the fundamental right to vote.

With this in mind, the ONCE Social Group has maintained direct contact with the Permanent Representation of Spain to the EU (REPER), presenting the use of the QR code on ballots as a mechanism to improve accessibility. In addition, the ONCE Social Group has taken part in the drafting of the European Commission’s Guide to good electoral practices for citizens with disabilities, and has influenced the drafting of the European Parliament Report on the European Elections 2024, as well as the Declaration of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU on the right to vote for persons with disabilities, proposing the introduction of using a QR code to improve electoral accessibility.

In addition, in early March, the ONCE Social Group organized a simulation event at the European Parliament in which a group of Spanish MEPs were able to experience the barriers faced by blind persons when voting, due to the lack of accessibility in the ballot papers.

In the simulation, MEPs were asked to cover their eyes with a blindfold and try to choose different coloured ballots from an electoral envelope. This exercise aimed to demonstrate the difficulties faced by blind persons when voting for their preferred political option without assistance. It illustrated how placing a QR code on the ballots can solve the accessibility issues of the voting process. This QR code would direct users to a website that verbalizes the chosen option, allowing voters to exercise their right to vote autonomously and on equal terms.

After this experience, the ONCE Social Group presented the video "The QR is necessary", which shows people with visual disabilities of different ages reflecting how on the QR code can make blind people vote on equal terms.

Finally, prior to the simulation, a roundtable was held with the participation of MEPs **Jordi Cañas, Mónica Silvana** and **Rosa Estarás**, the vice-president of the ONCE Social Group, **Alberto Durán**, and the director general for Communication of the European Parliament, Jaume Duch, to discuss the measures that need to be implemented to enhance the accessibility of the electoral process in the European Union.

## UK - Vision Rehabilitation

RNIB has launched a new campaign on vision rehabilitation, as part of our new focus on independent living. The ‘Out of Sight’ campaign report shows that thousands of people with sight loss have been left without the support they need. For more information please visit our [campaign website](https://www.rnib.org.uk/get-involved/support-a-campaign/out-of-sight/).

**ENDS**.

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