

Digital Age Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit Tool



Merri Health
Healthcare that moves with you

Executive Summary

Merri Health, as the lead agency for the Elder Abuse Prevention Networks (EAPNs) in the North and West metropolitan regions of Victoria, plays a crucial role in preventing elder abuse and promoting respect for older people.

This report outlines the progress of the Digital Age Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit Tool project, a primary prevention initiative aimed at ensuring older people can access information and services online without barriers.



The project, conducted in collaboration with a Deakin University Public Health and Health Promotion Undergraduate, includes a literature review, the development of an audit tool based on best practices in online accessibility and inclusivity, and testing of the tool on a selection of three Merri Health webpages.

The report addresses the prevalence and risk factors of elder abuse, highlighting the role of ageism and gender inequality as significant drivers. It also underscores some of the challenges faced by older people in utilising digital platforms.

To enhance digital accessibility and inclusivity for older people, the report discusses universal design, inclusive language, text and layout, colour and background, audio and video, navigation, and the incorporation of Auslan. Furthermore, it recommends the incorporation of quick exit options for webpages dealing with sensitive content such as elder abuse to ensure safety of users.

This comprehensive report serves as a valuable resource for Merri Health staff and members of the EAPNs, offering insights and recommendations to bridge the digital divide and empower older Australians while contributing to the prevention of elder abuse.

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Purpose

Merri Health is the lead agency for the Elder Abuse Prevention Networks (EAPNs) in the North and West metropolitan regions of Victoria. The EAPNs are funded by the Victorian Government to facilitate collaboration among professionals and empower communities to prevent elder abuse and contribute to a society that values and respects older people. Whilst the EAPNs work across the prevention continuum, their work has a primary prevention focus. Primary prevention aims to address the underlying root causes of elder abuse including ageism and gender inequality.

The Digital Age Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit Tool project takes a primary prevention approach, aiming to bridge the gap for older people accessing information and services online by identifying areas for improvement on websites of organisations that offer services to older people. As services increasingly engage with consumers online, particularly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is vital that older people are not excluded due to digital platforms not being accessible to their needs.

This report outlines the work of the project to date, including a literature review, to provide the context for elder abuse in Victoria and to review the standards of best practice in online accessibility. The development of an audit tool based on these standards, and the piloting of the audit tool against three Merri Health webpages. The intended audience of this report is Merri Health staff and members of the EAPNs.



The project was led by the Elder Abuse Prevention Coordinator at Merri Health in collaboration with an undergraduate student specialising in Public Health and Health Promotion from Deakin University.

We extend our sincere appreciation to Swinburne University: Department of Media and Communication for facilitating access to locally sourced images of older people. Additionally, we would like to express our gratitude to the Centre for Ageing Better for generously providing their extensive library of free age-positive images, which were also utilised throughout the report.

Literature Review

Limitations

Due to a limited scope, the literature review was unable to systematically analyse all sources relating to elder abuse and universal design. Some of the identified studies had small samples sizes and low generalisability, therefore requiring further qualitative and quantitative research to ensure improved reliability in the future.

Methods

The literature review was conducted through a scan of academic journals and grey literature including current databases, peer reviewed literature and industry reports. Search terms on both the Deakin University Library database and Google Scholar included 'elder abuse', 'inclusivity', 'prevention', 'inclusive design', 'universal design' and 'digital communications' and was primarily sourced through the Proquest Social Science Database and Informit IELHSS data for social sciences. The literature was sorted into key themes and sub-themes with key words highlighted and sorted thematically.

Older Australians

Older Australians make up 16.3 percent of Australia's overall population, with approximately 4.2 million people aged over 65 in 2020¹. Women make up over half (53%) of this cohort due to biological differences and longer life expectancy¹. Older Indigenous Australians make up 1.5 percent of Australia's population¹. For Indigenous Australians, anyone aged over 50 is considered an older person. This is due to the gap in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians of approximately 8.6 years for males and 7.8 years for females¹.

Elder Abuse

Definition

The most consistently recognised definition comes from the World Health Organisation defining elder abuse as 'a single, or repeated act, or lack of appropriate action, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person'². Different forms of elder abuse include psychological, emotional, financial, sexual, and physical abuse, as well as neglect³. The impacts of elder abuse can include physical injury, depression, cognitive decline, and premature mortality⁴. In Victoria, elder abuse is recognised as family violence under the Family Violence Protection Act (2008)⁵.

Prevalence

The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study (2021) found the overall prevalence of elder abuse within private dwellings in Australia to be approximately 14.8 percent in the 12 months prior to the survey⁴. Noting a significant increase from 2008 where rates of

elder abuse were between 2 and 5 percent⁴. The largest proportion of victims of elder abuse are people aged between 80 and 84 accounting for 21.2 percent of cases, with 61 percent of victims being reliant on someone else to meet their care needs, and 95 percent of incidents occurring in close relationships including family and intimate partners⁶.

Risk Factors

There are factors which increase the risk of becoming a victim or a perpetrator of elder abuse⁴. Risk factors that increase the likelihood of experiencing elder abuse include functional or care dependency often due to physical function impairment or frailty, or cognitive impairment or deterioration including dementia, social isolation, a history of abuse, family violence, conflict, or other trauma⁴.

Risk factors that may increase the likelihood of perpetrating elder abuse include financial or emotional dependency on an older person, drug and alcohol abuse, history of family violence or conflict, mental health difficulties, caregiver stress or burnout⁴.

Drivers

Ageism involves stereotyping and discriminating against people based on their age and was found to be associated in one-third of all incidents of elder abuse in a Queensland based study⁶. In Australia, older people are often portrayed as frail, weak, worthless, not contributing, or incapable of making their own decisions. These sorts of stereotypes can contribute to older people having less social standing or power in the community, which can lead to their disempowerment^{7 8 9}. It is believed that until the contributions of older people to society are recognised, valued, and respected, the prevalence of elder abuse will continue to rise^{7 8}.

Gender inequality is also a driver of elder abuse and is a key driver of family violence generally. Gender stereotypes signify gender roles signalling what is expected by men and women in a household or in society⁶. Older women are often undervalued and expected to participate in a large degree of unpaid work such as caring for grandchildren or ageing parents¹⁰.

Diversity that exists within populations including religion, ability and class, can intersect with both age and gender to further an individual's experiences of marginalisation and isolation^{6 7}. Multicultural and First Nations older people face an increased risk of elder abuse due to intersecting forms of oppression and discrimination¹¹.

Gendered Experience

It is well established in the literature that family violence is gendered in nature. The Family Violence Protection Act (2008) notes 'that whilst anyone can be a victim or perpetrator of family violence, family violence is predominantly committed by men against women, children and other vulnerable persons.'⁵. This was also found by the Royal Commission into Family Violence and significant research by Our Watch^{9 12 9}.

1 in 6 women have experienced intimate partner violence, compared to 1 in 16 men⁹. 75% of victims of domestic violence reported the perpetrator as male¹³. Experiences of intimate partner violence can perpetuate into older age, and these dynamics continue as a form of elder abuse¹¹. The intersection between gender and age can place older women at higher risk of experiencing abuse⁹.

Compared to intimate partner violence, elder abuse has a more even distribution across men and women as both victims and perpetrators. 16 percent of women and 14 percent of men are reported victims¹. Majority of perpetrators of elder abuse are adult children – where 55 percent are male, and 45 percent are female¹.

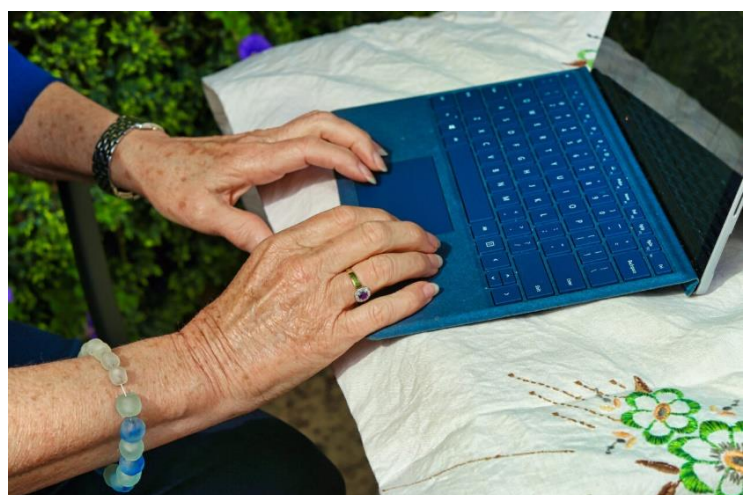
There are reported differences in the forms of elder experiences by women and men. Typically, women report higher rates of psychological abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, compared to men who report higher rates of physical abuse⁴. Rates of reported financial abuse are similar for men and women³.

Barriers to Seeking Help

There are many reasons that victims of elder abuse do not report the abuse or reach out to services for support. Many victims of elder abuse are unaware or unable to recognise that what they are experiencing is a form of abuse⁹. Given that majority of cases of elder abuse are carried out by those closest to the victim, many individuals feel obligated to protect their family and close relationships or feel obliged to stay silent due to control the perpetrator might have over their livelihood or care³.

People with limited language proficiency can face additional barriers, as can people who are living with dementia, cognitive impairment, or other related illnesses¹⁴. The National Elder Abuse Prevalence Study found that 6 in 10 victims of elder abuse did not seek assistance or advice due to a lack of awareness of services which provide support⁴.

Where women fleeing a family violence situation might separate from a partner, older people are often very reluctant to report abuse by their adult children⁴. Reasons for this include not wanting to lose the relationship with their children, being fearful of repercussions for their children, fear of being alienated from grandchildren, and experiences of shame and embarrassment preventing help seeking¹⁵.



Digital Use Amongst Older Australians

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) found that 61.6 percent of older Australians had used the internet within the previous 3 months, they also found that internet use decreases as age increases¹⁶. Reasons that older people did not use the internet included a lack of confidence or knowledge (20.7%), and reliance on family or friends for internet access (20.7%)¹⁶. A National Survey conducted by Seniors Rights Victoria found that 7 percent of those aged 50 and over reported very low comfort levels in using digital communication³.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic rates of internet use increased for older people as services embraced telehealth and needed to find new ways of connecting with consumers. Post pandemic, many services have remained online or offering hybrid services. The number of older people engaging online has remained higher than pre-pandemic levels¹⁷.



Improving access to digital platforms can provide opportunities for older people to increase their understanding of risk factors and warning signs related to elder abuse, as well as to connect with support services¹⁵. It can also assist in protecting older people from becoming isolated which is a risk factor for elder abuse¹⁸

Barriers to Accessing Information Online

There are many barriers which prevent older people from utilising digital platforms and seeking information online. These can include digital platforms being confusing and complex for those with limited experiences online, a fear of the unknown, potential embarrassment of doing something wrong or breaking something, as well as security and privacy concerns with a key worry surrounding scams or misinformation¹⁹. A lack of consultation with this age group has resulted in poorly constructed digital information that does not address their needs²⁰.

Ageism on Digital Platforms

Negative and degrading images of older people online can further entrench negative stereotypes of ageing and depict ageing as a decline or loss of identity¹⁹. Such images often depict older people as lonely, dependent, and frail. Positive images of older age can help to promote positive messages about ageing and empower older people to engage in resources²¹. Images should avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes about older adults and instead showcase older people engaging in work, community activities and ordinary everyday activities, avoiding images of extreme activities such as skydiving or bodybuilding unless relevant²³.

Best Practice in Online Inclusivity and Accessibility

Universal Design

Universal website design relates to a set of general principles which ensure that webpages can be used by people with a range of different characteristics, abilities and needs²². These principles include website design being useful and accommodating for a range of abilities and preferences and communicating necessary information to users²². As older people are part of the online community, it is essential that universal design is considered in the development and update to digital information directed to older people to ensure they can access and understand content.

Inclusive Language

The use of inclusive language is important to appeal to people across different age groups. Terms such as 'young' or 'mature' can be perceived negatively and should ideally be replaced with age referencing language such as 'younger people' or 'older people'²³.



Often a reference to age is made when it is not needed, therefore it is recommended to remove unnecessary age-based labels such as 'older people' where the word 'people' would be just as suitable. This emphasizes similarities, rather than differences making the content more inclusive²³. Likewise, terms such as 'them' should be replaced with 'we' or 'us' to remind users of the collective experience of ageing²³.

Generally, the use of plain, simple, everyday language is most effective for inclusive communications for a broad audience^{22 24}. The use of slang, acronyms or professional jargon should be avoided²².

When discussing matters such as ageing or elder abuse, it can be more useful to find positive and encouraging language that involves the reader rather than impact-driven or strongly negative language which can be too confronting or off putting for some readers²³.

Text and Layout

The use of large text sizes, of at least 12 point with scaling and resizing options ensures inclusivity for older people with low or declining vision²². Text should have the option to be resized up to 200 percent without the need for assisted technologies²². Large and descriptive headings and subheadings help to increase page organisation and reduce confusion for users²².

Large paragraphs of bold or italicised text, as well as the overuse of different designs or styles throughout a webpage should be avoided^{22 25}. Using the same design and structure throughout a website has been found to be helpful for older people²⁵.

Colouring and background

As many older people age, they lose contrast sensitivity which relates the ability to perceive clear outlines of small objects and differentiate shading and contrasts from the background of webpages²⁶. It is therefore important to ensure a clear contrast between images, text and background colours as well as using light coloured backgrounds and avoiding harsh or darker colours²².

Audio and video

Embedding multimedia including audio and videos into digital platforms can make webpages more engaging for the user. Audio and video content can be beneficial to older people who have vision impairment, difficulty reading, or hearing loss²⁶.

When incorporating multimedia, it is beneficial to include transcripts and captions, and to avoid background noise²². Additionally providing Text-to-Speech options allows those who cannot read the content to listen instead²².



Any multimedia should have functionality to be paused and restarted at any point, as well as a mute option to reduce confusion or distraction¹⁹. If the audio content automatically plays for more than three seconds, there should be an option to stop the video, or the ability to control the audio volume²².

Auslan

Providing material in Australian Sign Language (Auslan) is vital for members of the Deaf community to access important information²⁷. Whilst videos, captions and transcripts are important, for many Deaf people they are insufficient. This is because English is not the first language of many Deaf people, making it difficult or impossible for them to understand captions or transcripts alone²⁷. Furthermore, automatic captions can at times be inaccurate, delayed or incomplete. Auslan interpreted videos are essential if an organisation wishes to reach all sections of the community with a particular message²⁷.

Navigation

Digital platforms should be self-explanatory for users, ensuring that search options and site navigation are clear and easy to follow to avoid confusion. It is recommended that long-scroll pages are limited as these can be difficult for people with arthritis or tremors to navigate²⁸.

A sitemap and overview homepage allows users to understand what content they are viewing and where to view it through links and prompts²². Breadcrumbs are a navigation tool that allow users to keep track of their current location in relation to the webpages they are viewed before. This also allows users to quickly navigate back to their starting point or a previous webpage²².

Use of links

The use of external links to other resources and organisations can provide further information for older people to seek help and advice. Where possible links should be kept to a minimum and should be made clear through large font sizes and colouring which are highlighted when a mouse hovers over them for greater visibility²⁵. The colour of the link should change when the site is visited to differentiate between links that have and have not been visited²⁵.



Links should include a name that describes where the link will take the user and avoid the use of 'click here' or 'more'. Ensuring websites are easy to navigate will also help to ensure older people can use and reuse resources²⁵. The need to double click on a link should be avoided as this can be challenging for users with motor impairments²⁸.

Quick Exit

If a webpage includes sensitive content, such as information on elder abuse, family violence, or sexual assault, it is recommended that there be a 'Quick Exit' function that allows users to instantly change the content on the screen to something unrelated²⁹. A quick exit button allows a user to easily switch to a neutral website, such as a Google search window or weather bureau page, to conceal what they were looking at. This is important should the person who is using violence enter the room. Information about how to clear browsing data or enter a 'private' search mode could also help to ensure safety when accessing such information and advice for those who require increased for privacy²⁹.

Digital Age Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit Tool

The Digital Age Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit Tool (the tool) has been designed to recommend improvements in both inclusivity and accessibility on webpages so that older people are able to access the information they need.

The tool is informed by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and Victorian Government Digital Guidelines to ensure best practice.

The tool was developed in 2023 by the Elder Abuse Prevention Project Coordinator in collaboration with a Deakin University Public Health and Health Promotion Student at Merri Health.

The tool is designed to be used by staff within Merri Health and more broadly by services who work with older people.

Instructions:

The tool comprises questions covering various aspects such as language, text, layout, images, etc.

You can respond with yes, no, or not applicable (N/A). If the question is not relevant to your webpage select N/A.

Yes, indicates that you meet the recommended standard, while *no* prompts you to read the recommendation for guidance on enhancing webpage accessibility.

Please note that the tool is general and may not cover every scenario or aspect of your webpage.

Consider your specific audience and the context of your organisation and program when using the tool.

Lastly, use the comment section on the final page to gather thoughts and summarise your next steps in improving webpage accessibility and inclusivity.

Digital Age Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit Tool

Date of audit				Auditor name and role	
Title of webpage					
Link to webpage					
QUESTION	YES	NO	N/A	EXPLANATION & RECOMMENDATION	
Is the language plain and easy to understand, using everyday words without any jargon or acronyms?				When writing for the general public, use straightforward language so that people with different levels of reading and writing skills can understand. Replace any complex jargon, acronyms, or professional terms with simple, everyday English.	
Is the language age inclusive?				Use terms such as <i>'people'</i> or <i>'individuals'</i> instead of specifying age as <i>'older person'</i> or <i>'younger person'</i> when age is not relevant. Choose inclusive phrases like <i>'we'</i> rather than <i>'them'</i> whenever possible.	
Is the font size a minimum of 12pt?				A font size of at least 12pt is recommended for the body of text to enhance readability, especially for those with declining vision. Replace any text with a smaller font size to ensure it's at least 12pt.	
Is there an option to resize text, allowing it to be increased up to 200 percent in size?				Resizing text is advisable to enhance accessibility for individuals with vision impairments. Users should be able to enlarge text up to 200 percent without affecting the website's functionality.	
Is the page heading clearly distinguishable from the body of text?				Headings are important for organising content into meaningful sections, facilitating easier navigation for users when scanning for information. Headings should be at least 1.3 times larger than the body text. For instance, if the body text is in 12pt font size, the heading should be a minimum of 15.6pt.	
Does the page heading clearly convey what the content of the page is about?				Headings should effectively communicate the webpage's content, helping users quickly determine its relevance to their needs. Subheadings, should organise groups of information within the webpage for clarity and easy navigation.	

QUESTION	YES	NO	N/A	EXPLANATION & RECOMMENDATION
Are paragraphs concise, containing roughly 70 words or fewer?				Keeping paragraphs short, ideally around 70 words or less, helps users scan information more efficiently. If there are lengthy paragraphs, consider breaking them down into smaller ones to enhance the comprehension of the content.
Is the website using a minimum number of fonts (no more than 3)?				Using more than three fonts can be disorienting for users. It's advisable to stick to a range of 1-3 fonts on the webpage. Avoid complex fonts, like script fonts that resemble handwriting, as they can hinder readability. Opt for a simple sans serif font like Arial or Calibri for better readability.
Is the background colour of the webpage a light shade?				Dark background colours can strain the eyes, while lighter background colours contribute to better readability. Additionally, a light pastel background is gentler on the eyes compared to a stark white background.
Does the text colour contrast from the background colour?				Use black text on pastel backgrounds for better readability. Avoid red on green or green on red, as these are difficult for those with red/green colour blindness.
Is there an option to convert Text-to-Speech?				Text-to-Speech is a feature that lets users click a button to have the webpage read aloud. It's especially helpful for visually impaired users to access the webpage's content.
Is key information presented in Auslan?				English is not the primary language for many Deaf individuals. Therefore, it's crucial to translate key information into Auslan (Australian Sign Language) to ensure they can access information effectively.
Are there transcripts and/or captions provided for videos? If captions are used, are they placed on a plain background and not overlaid on moving images?				Captions serve as vital aids for users who may struggle with fast-paced, inaudible, or unclear audio. They also allow individuals to watch videos without relying on audio, benefiting those who are hard of hearing or deaf.

QUESTION	YES	NO	N/A	EXPLANATION & RECOMMENDATION
Are audio recordings, including those within videos, clear and easily audible?				Background noise in audio can be distracting and hinder content comprehension. Individuals who are hard of hearing or use hearing aids may struggle to distinguish speech from background noise. Aim to record high-quality audio in a quiet environment or eliminate background noise during editing to enhance accessibility.
Do videos contain options to mute, pause and replay?				Having pause and replay options is beneficial for users who want to pause the content and revisit it later, enhancing flexibility and accessibility.
Do hyperlinks to other websites stand out from the body of text and include a detailed title?				Ensuring users are aware of where external links lead is crucial to prevent concerns about scams or irrelevant content. Avoid using vague titles like ' <i>click here</i> ' or " <i>more</i> " for links, as they don't provide clear information about the destination.
Are there clear navigation options to go back, home, and view the navigation path to the current page?				Ensuring users can easily return to a previous page or navigate to the home page is crucial. Additionally, it's helpful for users to have a clear visual pathway, often referred to as "breadcrumbs," showing how they reached the current page as this can assist users to revisit the webpage again if needed.
Is there a "quick exit" option available on the webpage if it contains sensitive content?				If the webpage includes sensitive content (e.g. information on family violence, elder abuse, sexual assault) include a "quick exit" function, which quickly redirects users to a neutral site (e.g. Google search or a weather page) to safeguard privacy.
Are the appropriate helplines and support services clearly provided?				For pages related to sensitive issues like family violence, elder abuse, or sexual assault, ensure clear links to helplines and support services. Use descriptive link titles and offer various contact methods, including webpage, phone, and hours of operation information.
Do the images of older people reflect diversity in terms of people, cultures, settings, and activities?				Ensure inclusive and diverse images of older individuals, representing various ages, abilities, cultures, and activities. Avoid stereotypes and extreme scenarios unless relevant. Instead opt for realistic depictions of everyday activities that reflect the local community.

COMMENTS & ACTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Pilot

The Digital Age Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit Tool was tested on three Merri Health webpages: the Elder Abuse Prevention Network, Living Well Ageing Well, and Social Groups.



All three webpages incorporated user-friendly design, such as simple and inclusive language, appropriate font sizes, well-defined headings, concise paragraphs, a high-contrast colour scheme for readability, clear navigation pathways, and well-labelled external links. To further enhance accessibility, it is recommended to include features that allow users to adjust text size and enable text-to-speech conversion.

Specifically, the Elder Abuse Prevention Network webpage, while effective in utilising dot points to summarise information, could benefit from more introductory content about elder abuse before delving into the network's importance. The inclusion of a quick exit option is recommended for user safety in situations involving potential violence. Furthermore, it would be helpful to clearly indicate how users can seek help for elder abuse, separate from links to research papers.

Consideration should also be given to replacing an image portraying an older man appearing lonely and sad with one depicting empowered and connected older person(s), aligning with the EAPN's primary prevention goals. Additionally, the inclusion of video or audio content would assist users.

The Living Well Ageing Well webpage, while informative, may consider expanding on the available information and providing links to additional resources for interested users. Conversely, the Social Groups webpage offered comprehensive information and useful links, including one to My Aged Care. The inclusion of a video, with an option for closed captions, enhanced accessibility and comprehension of the program's content.

The trial of the audit tool clearly demonstrated its utility as an efficient means of assessing webpages and identifying opportunities for enhancing accessibility and inclusivity, thereby making online content more accessible to a broader audience.

Next Steps

Following the initial pilot of the Digital Age Inclusivity and Accessibility Audit Tool, several recommendations are proposed:

Internal Sharing

- Share the audit tool internally within Merri Health to enable teams to review and enhance their content when providing updates to the Marketing and Communications team more effectively.
- Empower teams with a better understanding of age inclusivity and accessibility principles to promote the creation of age friendly content in the future.

External Sharing

- Distribute this report and the audit tool to EAPNs to promote broader adoption and improvement of practices in the primary prevention of elder abuse.
- Encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing among organisations working in this space to collectively advance primary prevention efforts.

Ongoing Tool Improvement

- Continuously refine and enhance the audit tool based on user feedback and evolving accessibility standards.
- Acknowledge that while the tool represents best practices, organisations may face limitations in implementing all recommendations due to existing functionalities in their website. Encourage highlighting areas for future improvement, even if immediate changes are not feasible.

Intersectionality

- Recognise the need for further exploration of language considerations for individuals who speak languages other than English. Tailor accessibility efforts to accommodate cultural and linguistic diversity.
- Extend inclusivity efforts to other intersections of the community, such as LGBTIQ+ and First Nations people. Develop strategies to ensure content is accessible and culturally sensitive.

Further Research

- Emphasise the importance of ongoing research in the field of primary prevention of elder abuse. Recognise that this is a dynamic and evolving space that requires increased funding and further research.

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