

# Roadmap for Inclusive & Accessible Municipal Communications in Williamstown, MA

November 2025



Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center  
for Public Management

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# Acknowledgements

This report was developed by the Public Innovation Design and Communications Teams at the Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

The Collins Center Team worked closely with the Williamstown Town Manager Bob Menicocci to facilitate access to information, town staff, and community members. Communications Director Laura Christensen and Information Technology Manager Jason Morin were also invaluable partners.

A special thanks to town staff and community partners: public focus group participants, Williamstown Select Board members, Milne Public Library, WilliNet, Williams College, Mount Greylock Regional School District, Destination Williamstown, and Williamstown Chamber of Commerce who all contributed their thoughts and indispensable insights.

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# Introduction

This engagement was designed to help the Town of Williamstown improve its communications with the community in general, specifically seeking ways to achieve better connection between community members and town government operations through more inclusive and accessible communication methods.

Town of Williamstown leadership is committed to improving communications with its external community partners and internally throughout the organization.

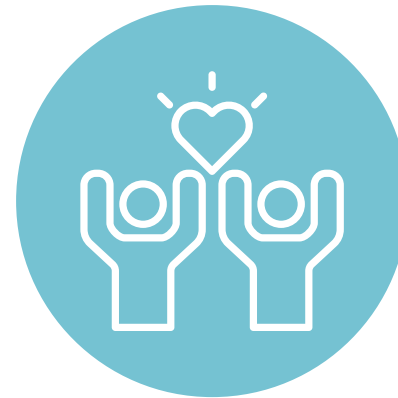
Communications and engagement with community members and partners is a sound investment of Williamstown's resources and will continue to have a place among the Town's primary functions.

# Project Intentions



## 1. Enhancing Municipal Communications and Transparency

The core objective is to develop strategies and an overarching approach to enhance municipal communication to residents and other community members regarding important topics such as town projects, initiatives, regulations, and events.



## 2. Promoting Civic Engagement and Community Wellbeing

The project aims to create a strategy to promote civic engagement and a culture of participation in town affairs and town meetings. This is directly tied to improving community members' feelings of connection and belonging.



## 3. Ensuring ADA Compliance and Accessibility of Digital Communication Tools

This project organizes resources and best practices to help guide the town in maintaining ADA compliance on their official government website.





## About the Community

Williamstown is a scenic rural community that was incorporated in 1765 and located in the northwest corner of Berkshire County, Massachusetts. A culturally vibrant college town, Williamstown has a population of around 7,500 residents. Williamstown's citizens include a mix of long-term residents, families, retirees, and students who attend Williams College. Williamstown operates under a Select Board–Town Manager form of government and maintains a strong tradition of New England town governance through their Annual Town Meeting.

As per the 2020 American Community Survey, Williamstown's racial demographic breakdown is 83.4% White, 5.3% Asian, 4.8% Black or African American, 3.9% two or more races, and 1.7% some other race. Less than one percent of residents identify as American Indian or Alaska Native. Like all Berkshire County municipalities, Williamstown is predominantly white; however, it is somewhat more racially diverse than the county overall, due in part to the student population of Williams College. A sizable portion of the jobs in Williamstown are either directly or indirectly connected to Williams College.



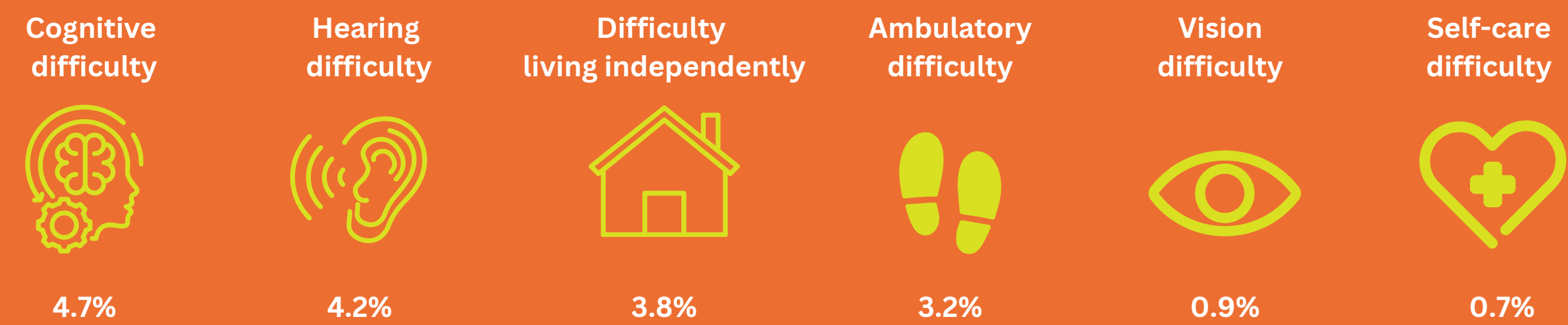
## About the Community

A highly educated community, 68.4% of residents have a bachelor's degree or higher. Less than ten percent (8.4%) of Williamstown residents were foreign-born, and 6.3% of the total population have veteran status. The Town's population has varied since 1960 but, in recent decades, has followed the broader Berkshire County pattern of overall decline. The population of Williamstown became significantly younger between 2000 and 2020, with the median age dropping from 46.6 to 29.7 years. According to the University of Massachusetts Donahue Institute Population Projections, Williamstown's population is expected to increase by 11% by the year 2040.

The 2020 American Community Survey indicates that 13.4% of Williamstown residents age 5 and older speak a language other than English at home. Among these households, 12.9% speak Spanish, 42% speak another Indo-European language, 27% speak an Asian or Pacific Island language, and 17.2% speak a language classified as "other."



The Town’s recent ADA Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan (SETP) indicates about 11% of Williamstown’s total population identifies as having a disability. The Town’s 2022 Housing Needs Assessment reports upwards of 19% of Williamstown residents having some disability or limitation. Among residents with a disability, the majority (about 60.6%) are aged 65 or older. The types of disabilities experienced by residents break down as the following:



In terms of technology access, mobile wireless carriers available in Williamstown collectively cover 100% of the Town’s land area. 5G reception covers up to 93.84% of residents’ homes. Multiple high speed internet options are available, though these do not guarantee equitable access to the internet. However, Williamstown’s youthful population shift, available internet coverage, and modest but meaningful racial diversity position the Town well for forward-thinking efforts that foster a sense of inclusion and belonging for residents across all generations and abilities.



# About the Community



# Executive Summary



This report aims to provide a forward-looking roadmap for enhancing the Town of Williamstown's municipal communication efforts and foster greater civic engagement.

As established in the background research and discovery process that underpins this plan, any investment in doing it well is critical for cultivating an inclusive, safe, and welcoming environment for all.

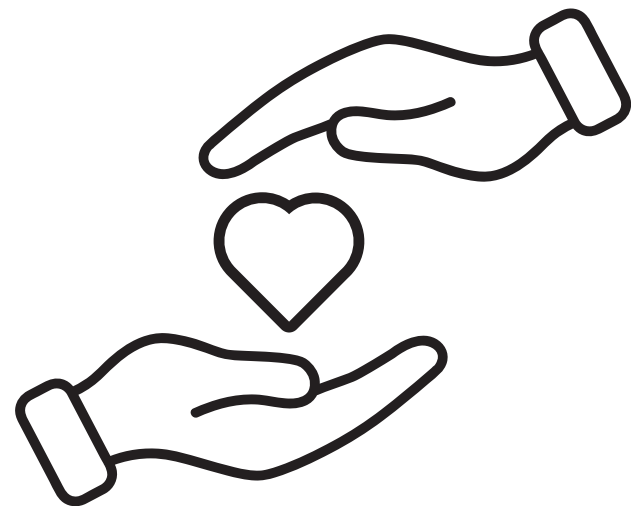
Synthesizing insights from a variety of sources—including the findings of the 2023 CARES Final Report and other background materials, in-depth community partner interviews, and direct feedback from public focus groups—this plan addresses identified gaps by first understanding communication needs, then prescribing effective solutions.

The following analysis and recommendations are designed to guide Williamstown's municipal leaders in creating a culture of transparency, accessibility, and community belonging, ensuring that all residents feel informed, included, and empowered to participate in town affairs.

This document begins by presenting a candid analysis of the current communications landscape, establishing the essential foundation upon which the strategic recommendations are built. It outlines the project discovery methods, staff and community insights, and organizes priority recommendations.

# Guiding Principles

The concepts of inclusivity and accessibility guided project work throughout this engagement.



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## Inclusivity

Inclusivity means intentionally designing communication and engagement processes to reach populations that have been historically excluded; such as low-income residents, youth, renters, or non-majority ethnic groups—to ensure policy decisions reflect the full diversity of community needs and voices.

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## Accessibility

Accessibility in communications means ensuring that all community members, regardless of physical ability, linguistic background, or technological access, have an equal opportunity to receive, understand, and act upon public information.

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# Important Terms

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## **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title II**

[ADA Title II](#) requires state and local government entities to provide people with disabilities an equal opportunity to benefit from all their programs, services, and activities, ensuring accessibility in physical spaces (like buildings and transportation) and digital content (websites, apps), using auxiliary aids (interpreters, Braille) for effective communication, and preventing discrimination in public services like courts, parks, and transit. It mandates accessibility for public services, not just physical access, and has specific deadlines for digital compliance, often referencing WCAG 2.1 standards.

## **WCAG 2.1**

WCAG 2.1 is an international set of standards for web accessibility, developed by the [W3C](#), that aims to make digital content accessible to people with a wide range of disabilities.

## **Alternative Text and Image Description**

Textual explanations for images, primarily for accessibility, but "alt text" is the concise, code-based version (in an alt attribute) read by screen readers, while a fuller "image description" can be longer, more detailed, and sometimes visible (like a caption), serving both accessibility and SEO by explaining the image's purpose and content to visually impaired users and search engines. Alt text is short and essential for understanding, whereas longer descriptions add context and detail.

## **Screen Reader**

Assistive software that vocalizes on-screen text and interface elements, or sends them to a refreshable braille display, allowing blind or visually impaired users to navigate computers, websites, and apps, by converting visual information into speech or braille, enabling interaction with digital content.

## **Plain Language**

Writing that is clear, concise, and easy for the intended audience to understand the first time they read it. It uses straightforward language, common words, short sentences, and logical organization to avoid jargon and confusion.

# Project Methods

The following methods provided the fundamental background for this project. In the pages that follow each is discussed in greater detail.

- 1 Scan of Communications Landscape**
- 2 Key Partner Interviews**
- 3 Public Focus Groups**
- 4 Technical Assistance**



# Existing Communications Landscape

At the time of the project's start, a scan of existing communications tools were reviewed by the project team.

This report acknowledges these findings were observed during a fixed period in time. Throughout the life of the project, the Town made various improvements to their digital communications capacities.

## Communications Tools Inventory

The Town of Williamstown has a strong foundation in communications and offers a wide range of one-way communication tools, such as a news feed, emergency alerts, events calendar, public notices, reports, and permitting/licensing forms. Most of these tools are accessible directly from the homepage, promoting user-friendly navigation. Emergency alerts and public notices are prominently integrated into the news carousel which creates timely updates for residents. Williamstown also incorporates more sophisticated tools such as a dashboard for landfill data and video explainers for topics such as elections to further diversify communications formats.

Important resources such as meeting minutes, agendas, and documents are accessible online, often through an external platform like Google Drive or eCode360. Williamstown has their previous ADA Self-Evaluation and Transition Plan (SETP) posted which showcases an effort towards accessibility. A unified branding approach provides a cohesive visual identity across platforms.

Two-way communication tools are highly specific (such as to report a streetlight outage), and broad issue reporting or general feedback tools are not available. Similarly, the Town does not disseminate a newsletter which could provide a streamlined way for residents to receive updates directly. Links to Town-managed social media accounts are not linked on the Town website, reducing cross-platform connectivity. Documents are not consistently hosted, as some are on external platforms and others are within the site, which may confuse users or create barriers to access.

Lastly, the Town lacks a Frequently Asked Questions section that addresses a broad range of common resident questions.

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## Social Media Inventory

Williamstown and its departments use several social media platforms, such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram. Most of the Facebook accounts are actively maintained and have substantial follower counts (e.g., Police – 3,900 followers; Chamber of Commerce – 2,100 followers). These pages provide regular updates on community interests.

There are a few areas for improvement with respect to Williamstown's overall social media strategy. Many accounts post only a few times a month or as needed, an irregularity that may reduce engagement with residents. The Town's X account has been inactive since 2015, making it effectively non-functional (more severely, dormant accounts may create a perception of neglect.) The sole Instagram account has a lower follower count compared to the Facebook pages, which could imply it is underutilized or less well-known among residents. Social media posts often lack alternative text for graphics, which excludes users who rely on assistive technologies to interpret visual content. In the same vein, decorative images are not marked as such, leading to unnecessary interruptions for screen readers.

In sum, the municipality's social media presence is well-established on Facebook, with strong department-specific engagement. However, there's an opportunity to enhance consistency, expand Instagram usage, and either revitalize or discontinue dormant accounts. A cohesive social media strategy with regular updates, cross-platform promotion, and additional accessibility features could significantly boost the Town's outreach efforts and foster a greater sense of inclusion and belonging.

# Existing Communications Landscape

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## Accessibility Review

Williamstown's public-facing digital artifacts abide by many ADA compliance principals as recommended by the Website Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Color contrast, plain language, and acronym use requirements are met across all documents reviewed which makes content more accessible for users with various cognitive abilities or visual impairments. Fillable forms in the Online Permitting Center are compliant with assistive technologies. File names are clear and descriptive, making it easier for users to identify the purpose of documents when browsing.

In terms of areas for improvement, some hyperlinks are not descriptive enough, such as those labeled "Click here," which can hinder navigation for users relying on screen readers. Certain documents are scanned PDFs, rendering them inaccessible to screen readers. Meeting agendas lack information on how to request accommodations, which is critical for ensuring equitable access to public meetings. Additionally, navigation is more difficult for documents that lack logical headings and subheadings.

An in depth analysis of Williamstown's online assets was conducted for the Town's [ADA Self Evaluation and Transition Plan](#) from June of 2025, which inventories specific compliance issues that can be addressed to increase accessibility to users with disabilities.

# Key Partner Interviews



A series of interviews were conducted with Williamstown municipal department heads and key community partners to gain insights into their communications processes, collaboration, tools, and staffing. The interviews were conducted on Zoom, with each session lasting approximately 45 minutes. Several interviewees also provided supplemental material and information for consideration and review by the project team.

Participants were asked a structured set of questions designed to explore their department's or organization's communication practices, including the tools and platforms used for internal and external communications, existing workflows and processes for managing communications, and challenges and gaps in current communication strategies. Participants were also invited to share feedback on ways in which the Town could create a greater sense of belonging and inclusivity within the community.

Interviews revealed a wealth of qualitative information. Analysis revealed several common themes that emerged.

### Major Themes:

1. There is a lack of regular communication amongst departments, and also with community partners.
2. There is no central point of communication or specific point of contact to help with coordination.
3. There are missed opportunities for outreach and collaboration.
4. More structured, formal, and intentional communication was desired.
5. Willingness to collaborate and support the Town in their communication efforts was strong.

# Key Partner Interview Findings





# Public Focus Groups

The sessions were instrumental in validating initial project assumptions and insights that directly contributed to the subsequent recommendations and resources in this report.

Analysis of the discussions from both sessions identified key thematic priorities for the community.

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The project team prioritized community engagement through two distinct public focus groups. One session was held in person at Williamstown Town Hall, and one was held virtually via an online meeting platform in order to gather qualitative data on community needs and preferences. The focus groups were advertised by town staff and shared by community partners. This dual format approach was intentionally designed to address potential barriers to participation, allowing community members with limited internet access or those who preferred face-to-face dialogue to attend the in-person session, while providing a convenient option for others via the online meeting platform. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes.

**A focus group guide was used at each session, focusing on the following core questions:**

- In the coming months, the Town is going to be redesigning and launching a new municipal website. What features or types of information would you find most useful on this new site?
- On the Town website you can pay bills, report issues, and apply for permits or funding. If you've used any of these functions, tell us about your experiences, please.
- Tell us about your ideal Town communications. What topics, frequency, and mode of communication would make you feel up-to-date and included?
- What could the Town do or say that would make you feel like your participation in Town matters is welcome and wanted?

# Public Focus Group Findings

## Website Preferences

- Centralized, comprehensive calendar that covers government, arts, culture, and community events
- Link to important community organizations like WilliNet and Destination Williamstown
- Organize pages in a way that the community understands
- Improve search function so documents and policies are easier to find
- Real-time and easy-to-find updates on the main homepage, including emergency alerts
- Use plain language, simplify wording and use of acronyms
- Updated documents and PDFs so that they are searchable

## Online Service Priorities

- Better explain online bill pay, consider transaction fees as a barrier to use
- Update outdated forms, permits, and applications
- Preference for web-based, fillable, and clearer application instructions
- Add information on voting process
- Add online registration for certain events

# Public Focus Group Findings

## Communication Medium Preferences

- Website – single source of truth; information is desired here before it goes out anywhere else. Should link to external organizations and other calendars.
  - Customizable users accounts was a well-received idea
- Social Media – mixed results, some users like the passive updates, others do not believe it should be the primary source of information due to needing an account to access
- Text Messages – some participants expressed a desire for texts about deadlines, construction updates, and even meeting notifications
- Email – weekly or monthly emails with updates are desired
- Flyers – residents want regularly-updated bulletin boards at Town Hall, the Library, and community spaces

## Content Priorities

- Government – more civic education on how residents can participate in government, more transparency around budget discussions, clearer meeting schedules
- Major Projects – bridge construction is not on website under “current projects’ and is hard to find information on. Want all projects accessible in one section.
- Contact Information – clearer information on who to contact for different issues

## Increasing Inclusivity Themes

### 1. Town Meeting

- Hold in a more central or walkable location, or provide transportation
- Provide childcare and consider earlier start time to avoid late-night sessions
- Provide Spanish translation of key meeting materials

### 2. Two-way Communications

- Elected officials and Town leaders should host more informal community meetings, such as “coffee hours”
- Create an FAQ section or ‘New to Town’ resources page on the website
- More digestible and proactive updates on important meetings

### 3. Having a Seat at the Table

- Increase representation of newer residents on important boards and committees
- Some newer residents and renters feel left out due to lack of outreach to them
- Provide simple guides on the core functions of government and how community members can become involved

### 4. Physical Gathering Spaces

- Invest in a community space; currently best option is the Library
- Leverage other community spaces to have a presence at, for example, the Farmer’s Market
- More events are needed where residents can connect outside of official government meetings

What we heard

# Public Focus Group Findings

# Technical Assistance

The technical assistance component of this project was designed to provide targeted support and guidance during a critical phase of the website enhancement efforts.

This assistance was important for ensuring strategic alignment and successful implementation of planned digital improvements.



## Vendor Selection and Discussions

Provided experienced advice and support throughout the procurement process, including drafting clear requirements, evaluating proposals from prospective vendors, and participating in negotiation discussions to ensure the final contract delivered optimal functionality and value for the Town.



## Identifying Opportunities & Funding

Conducted a comprehensive review of potential funding sources, including federal, state, and private grants, relevant to digital improvements and website enhancements.



## General Guidance on Website Improvements in Progress

Offered high-level strategic and tactical guidance on enhancing the municipal website's usability, accessibility, and content organization. This included recommendations for improving the resident experience, streamlining access to services, and aligning site architecture with best practices for local government communications and inclusivity.



# Vision & Strategic Goals

This section focuses on the strategic element of the plan, establishing a clear, aspirational future state for public communications and engagement in the Town of Williamstown.

It begins with a vision statement that defines success, then outlines four high-level goals required to achieve that vision. Later on, detailed action items are provided.

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**Williamstown will foster an informed, engaged, and connected community through clear, accessible, and proactive communication that builds trust and a shared sense of belonging.**

”

# Strategic Goals

- 1 Establish a professional, coordinated, and resourced communications function.** This goal addresses the need for dedicated staffing, clear policies, and consistent processes to manage town-wide communications effectively.
- 2 Create a centralized, accessible, and user-centric digital information hub.** This goal focuses on transforming the town website and other digital platforms into reliable, intuitive, and inclusive primary sources of information.
- 3 Foster proactive, two-way dialogue to enhance civic participation.** This goal aims to shift the Town from one-way information dissemination to active, ongoing conversations that lower barriers to participation and encourages resident feedback.
- 4 Strengthen community belonging through intentional and inclusive outreach.** This goal, drawing from the CARES report and public focus groups, centers on creating a welcoming environment for all residents, particularly newcomers, through deliberate community-building and multi-channel communication strategies.

# Recommendations & Action Plan

The following section forms the plan's actionable elements, presenting specific recommendations grounded in the methodology of the project. The recommendations are organized to align directly with the four strategic goals previously stated, providing a practical framework for implementation by the Town of Williamstown leadership and staff.

Implementation of these recommendations will require a coordinated effort and dedicated resources, representing a core investment in the community's future.



This symbol indicates an action is completed or in progress

# Building Capacity & Governance

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Achieving Goal 1: Establish a Professional, Coordinated, and Resourced Communications Function

1. **Strategic Investment in Staffing** It is imperative that the Town makes strategic investments in staffing by creating a dedicated communications position. This recommendation is supported by widespread calls from residents and key partners for a professional to manage the website, develop a cohesive social media strategy, and ensure consistency across all platforms. Concurrently, the Town should restore an in-house IT position to provide immediate technical support and to help work across departments to implement new systems. 

2. **Establish Clear Communications Governance** The Town must develop formal communications policies to standardize procedures and ensure consistency. These policies should include, at a minimum, a standardized document naming convention, a checklist for posting public meeting materials to ensure completeness, and clear guidelines for which platforms (e.g., website news, social media, newsletter) should be used for different types of information.

3. **Invest in Training and Skill Development** As strongly recommended in the CARES report, a critical step is to provide "inclusive facilitation training" for all committee chairs and members. This will improve the quality and civility of discourse in public meetings, making them more welcoming spaces for public participation. Additionally, all relevant staff must receive training on digital accessibility best practices, including how to create structured, machine-readable documents and add alternative text to all images posted on social media and the website.

# Rebuilding Williamstown's Online Presence

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Achieving Goal 2: Create a Centralized,  
Accessible, and User-Centric Digital  
Information Hub

1. **Execute a User-Centered Website Redesign** The forthcoming website redesign must prioritize the user experience and incorporate high-priority features identified by residents. The new site must include: 
  - An intuitive navigation system that organizes information by common user tasks (e.g., "Pay a Bill," "Apply for a Permit") and by department, with all Boards and Committees listed alphabetically.
  - A powerful, integrated search function capable of scanning all site content, including archived documents and externally hosted bylaws on platforms like eCode360.
  - A dedicated and comprehensive "Newcomer's Guide" with essential information on services like trash pickup, voter registration, and opportunities to get involved.
  - A central, comprehensive community calendar that allows for submissions from various town departments and community organizations, creating a single source for events.
  - An accessible document repository that digitizes all scanned PDFs and ensures all future documents are machine-readable with logical headings for screen readers.
  - A prominent, town-wide FAQ section to address common resident questions, from "How do I run for office?" to "Where is polling location?"



# Rebuilding Williamstown's Online Presence

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Achieving Goal 2: Create a Centralized,  
Accessible, and User-Centric Digital  
Information Hub

2. **Develop and Launch a Cohesive Social Media Strategy** A formal social media plan must be created to guide the Town's presence. This plan will address whether to revitalize or deactivate the dormant X (formerly Twitter) account, establish a regular posting frequency for the main Town accounts, and ensure all posts with graphics adhere to accessibility standards by including alternative text. Social media feeds should be embedded on the new website homepage to increase visibility and cross-platform engagement.

3. **Implement a Proactive Town-Wide Newsletter** Based on widespread desire expressed in focus groups, the Town must create and manage a regular newsletter. To ensure broad reach, it must be available via email subscription and also be offered in a printed, physical format if possible in order to reach the population of residents who are not online.

# Active Engagement: From One-Way Information to Conversation

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Achieving Goal 3: Foster Proactive, Two-Way Dialogue to Enhance Civic Participation

1. **Increase Direct, Informal Access to Town Officials** Building on the positive reception of a Selectboard member's coffee gatherings, these opportunities must be expanded. It is recommended that town leaders host regular, informal "office hours" at various accessible times and locations, such as the Farmer's Market, the Library, or local coffee shops, to meet residents where they are.
2. **Lower Barriers to Formal Civic Participation** The Town should consider taking specific actions to make Town Meeting more accessible and inclusive. Recommendations drawn from resident feedback include exploring alternative times and locations that do not conflict with family schedules, providing transportation and childcare, offering language translation services (particularly in Spanish), and creating a user-friendly, plain-language guide to the warrant articles.
3. **Create Channels for Resident Feedback and Dialogue** A general-purpose issue reporting or feedback tool should be implemented on the new website. Further, the Town must explore hosting monthly, topic-based community forums, as suggested by residents, to create a space for informal dialogue, education on key issues, and community building outside of formal public meetings.

# Community Building: Fostering a Culture of Welcome

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Achieving Goal 4: Strengthen  
Community Belonging Through  
Intentional and Inclusive Outreach

1. **Implement a New Resident Welcoming Program** Drawing directly from the CARES report and echoed in public focus groups, a crucial initiative is to "create a mechanism for welcoming new community members." This could take several forms, including an information packet mailed to new households, a gift basket of local products in a collaboration with community partners, a volunteer outreach committee, or the establishment of newcomers' social groups.
2. **Commit to Multi-Channel and Multilingual Communication** To reach all residents, the Town must adopt a communication strategy that blends digital tools with physical ones. This includes maintaining updated, dynamic bulletin boards in Town Hall and other central locations and using flyers for major events. Critically, key communications must be provided bilingually in Spanish to serve the community's second-largest language group.
3. **Promote a Welcoming Tone and Inclusive Language** All official Town communications should adopt an inviting and encouraging tone to make participation feel more accessible. Simple shifts in phrasing, such as using language like "Join in" and "You're a part of this!," can help model a more welcoming and inclusive civic culture.

# General Website Action Items

**Add the following action items to the website update and redesign checklist**

## **Design/Homepage/Sitemap Updates:**

- Design a mobile friendly and response layout
- Add a welcoming message and imagery conveying an inclusive community
- Above the fold placement of key services, calendar, news, and ways to stay connected
- Ensure brand consistency, use wayfinding process to inform design choices
- Organize categories into mega menus that make the most sense for community members vs. staff who have inside knowledge
- Group related information logically and categorize content based on user tasks, where possible
- Consider the consolidation of appropriate municipal websites into the primary Town page
- Create a website feedback form linked in the footer for reporting website issues and broken links

## **Monitor Analytics:**

- Establish Google Analytics and simple Looker Studio report for quick monitoring
- Establish Google Search Console if SEO improvements are desired to the next level
- Set up monthly reports to monitor traffic, searches, most popular pages

## **Improve Search Function:**

- Ensure robust keywords are present on all pages, use descriptive document titles
- Create a custom 404 redirecting to website feedback form, list web contact for those who want to follow up on bad links etc.
- Consider a trending section on home page with the top 8 most visited pages, searched for terms, or curated items the Town wants the community to see first

# General Website Action Items

## **Pages:**

- Create department pages with basic content, contact information, and timely updates
- Create a major town projects page/section
- Create a 'New to Town' page with relevant details like voting, trash & recycling, subscription options, and more
- Create a 'Stay Connected' page, cataloguing all the ways to stay in touch (website, social media, alerts, newsletters, etc.) in one place
- Develop a Town-wide FAQ page, with topics such as Town Meeting, Voting, Volunteering

## **Board & Committee Pages:**

- Reorganize this list to make better sense to members of the public, i.e. alphabetically, not by appointing authority
- Create a Board & Committee landing page to list all groups, with information for community members on how to get involved
- Use a standardized template layout that includes information like current membership, staff liaison, meeting schedule, and links to important meeting materials

## **News Items:**

- Design a timely news section placed prominently on the home page
- Make news items a subscription option, if possible
- Implement a weekly or monthly news digest on the website and/or as a periodic email e-newsletter (ideally both)



# General Accessibility Action Items

Please review the comprehensive **Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility** compiled in **Appendix A**

## **Documents:**

- Consolidate documents under a single repository, preferably within the website
- Digitize scanned documents
- Apply structured headings and subheadings using the built-in formatting options of the program being used consistently across all documents, especially those of high public interest like the Town Charter
- Ensure all PDFs are reviewed for accessibility prior to being added to the website
- Avoid adding proprietary file types such as Word or Excel as documents on the website, consider accessible PDFs instead

## **Images:**

- Train staff to add alternative text to images added to the website and on social media posts and mark decorative images appropriately
- Correct existing images to ensure alternative text properties are correct
- Avoid text heavy imagery to convey information or meaning

## **Training & Education:**

- Review the new regulations for [Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act \(ADA\)](#) closely, including the exceptions
- Annual (or more frequent) website and social media accessibility training for all content contributors
- Develop procedures to maintain the accessibility of the Town's website, including online documents, and provide training to staff

# General Accessibility Action Items

Please review the comprehensive **Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility** compiled in **Appendix A**

## Monitoring & Compliance

- Test to ensure the website functions correctly with commonly used assistive technologies like screen readers, screen magnifiers, and voice recognition software
- Ensure colors in the design, font, or other content added to the website meet color contrast ratio requirements
- Improve hyperlink descriptions. Text reading 'Click Here' with no surrounding text to indicate what the link is for isn't accessible
- Add accessibility information to meeting agendas via a standard footer in all documents with instructions, contact email, or form link
- Explore purchase and installation of accessibility software or widgets on all municipal websites
- Install and utilize accessibility features and guidelines on social media platforms
- Assign staff member(s), such as in Communications or IT, to evaluate and correct accessibility errors on the Town's website and regularly review online assets for compliance
- Develop procedures to maintain the accessibility of the town's website, including online documents and provide training to staff
- Consider working with Disability Access Group or Committees to solicit feedback on usability and ease of use
- Better understand language needs in community and offer optional language translation of pages
- Enact any recommendations for online assets from the Town's recent ADA Self Evaluation and Transition Plan (June 2025)

# Other Action Items

## **Emergency Communications:**

- Expand and promote sign up for mass notification tool
- Review or create emergency communications protocols
- Identify authorized users of the mass notification tool and review which messages should be sent via this method
- Alerts on website home page (banner)
- Attend emergency or crisis communications training sessions

## **Website/Communications Feedback Mechanisms & Continuous Improvement:**

- Website feedback form linked in footer of all pages and custom 404 error to easily report general feedback, broken links, missing information or general ideas for improvement
- Consider a communications preferences survey to gather insight from the full community and make it available online and print; use community partners to help distribute the survey
- Scan for broken links and ADA compliance issues regularly
- Create a website content managers group (if applicable) and hold quarterly web content training series for staff with website editing responsibilities
- Create a user advisory group comprised of members of the community to gather feedback and test new features

## **Policies:** See Appendix B for Sample Policies

- Adopt a Website Governance Policy outlining content process, responsibility of departments vs. web team, other web standards
- Create a Communications & Engagement Plan (crisis, media relations, public engagement, accessibility policy)
- Adopt a Social Media Policy (internal and external)
- Adopt a Crisis Communications Policy (can be part of the Communications Plan or Emergency Preparedness Plan)

# Other Action Items

## **Social Media:**

- Perform audit of existing accounts, focus on one or two primary platforms to get started (e.g., Facebook and Instagram)
- Set realistic expectations for social media performance
- Tailor social media platform selection to meet community preferences
- Create policy moving forward to manage social media accounts or future requests for accounts
- Embed social media feeds or add visible links to the website homepage
- Encourage cross-department postings
- Follow social media accessibility guidelines





# Conclusion: A Commitment to Action

**This plan presents a clear message: enhancing municipal communication is a critical investment in the civic health and social fabric of Williamstown.** As the discovery process confirms, communication is at the heart of community, and a commitment to its excellence is fundamental to building a more inclusive, safe, and welcoming town.

The recommendations outlined provide a comprehensive and actionable framework for moving from a fragmented, reactive system to one that is coordinated, proactive, and inclusive. By building internal capacity, transforming digital platforms, and fostering genuine two-way dialogue, the Town can lower barriers to participation and strengthen the sense of belonging for all of its residents.

The Town's leadership is commended on the steps they have taken so far, including recent investments in professional communications and technology staff. The remaining action items in this plan will require additional resources that may not be readily available at this time. However, the ongoing commitment to this work is a powerful affirmation of the community's values and a crucial step toward building a more transparent, engaged, and connected Williamstown for generations to come.



## Appendix A:

# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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Many of the tips, tools, and resources listed in this Appendix offer baseline support for improving digital accessibility. Additionally, Digital.gov offers an [advanced approach to accessibility](#) which provides an easy to follow, in depth resource on government accessibility beyond what the checklists in this resource provide.

# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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## Plain Language

[Readable](#) is an online tool that assists in improving text readability. Free usage of Readable is limited.

[Text Readability Consensus Calculator](#) uses seven popular readability formulas to calculate the average grade level, reading age, and text difficulty of sample text. Government communications should be around a 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.

[Plainlanguage.gov](#) is an official federal website that provides resources geared towards government entities.

[Hemingway](#) is an online tool to improve language clarity.

[Mass.gov: How to Conduct a Plain Language Review](#) provides a step-by-step guide for reviewing public-facing content to make it easier to understand.

[Harvard Catalyst Writing Center – Plain Language Resources](#) offers resources and best practices for translating technical or academic content into accessible language.

# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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## Language Translation

[Localize](#) helps government agencies and municipalities provide their communities with essential services and information in the language they understand best. Automated content detection and delivery system coupled with advanced translation management helps remove language barriers and disparities quickly and easily. Pricing ranges.

[Para-Plus Translations](#) is a translation and interpretation company offering global translation and interpretation services to governments and municipalities to reduce disparities and inequalities. They offer transcription, voice-over, sign language, and Braille services in more than 100 languages.

[Government Machine Translation Software](#) list. Machine translation software facilitates the translation process by translating text automatically from one language to another without the need for human editing.

## Color Contrast & Visual Accessibility

Contrast and color use are vital to accessibility. Users, including users with visual disabilities, must be able to perceive content on the page. Use a [Contrast Checker](#) to ensure a contrast ratio of at least 4.5:1 for normal text and 3:1 for large text

# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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## Accessibility Features in Microsoft Suite (M365)

Many Microsoft 365 applications include an Accessibility Checker that finds accessibility problems and lists suggestions for making content accessible in Outlook, Word, Excel, or PowerPoint. All Town staff are encouraged to use these features when creating public-facing materials or internal documents.

The accessibility checker can be found under the Review tab in each application. The tool automatically scans for common accessibility issues, such as missing alternative text, poor color contrast, or incorrect heading structures. Staff should use this function as a final step before publishing or sharing content.

Additionally, PowerPoint offers live subtitles and automatic captioning during presentations. To activate:

- Go to the Slide Show tab and select “Always Use Subtitles”
- Select “Subtitle Settings” to choose the spoken language and subtitle language. You can also choose the desired position of the captions or subtitles
- Toggle on the “Subtitles” button from Slide Show View or Presenter View, located on the toolbar below the main slide
- Start the slide show and begin speaking. As you speak, your narrative will appear on-screen as captions or subtitles

Additional support can be found at [Microsoft's Accessibility Help Center](#)

# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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## Accessibility Features in Google Suite (Google Workspace)

Google calls its suite of applications “Google Workspace” and offers the [Google Workspace user guide to accessibility](#) with hyperlinks to accessibility features for each one of its applications. Some helpful guides include:

- [Make your document, presentation, sheets & videos more accessible](#)
- [Present slides with captions](#)
- [Use Google editors with a screen reader](#)
- [Use Google editors with assistive technologies](#)

## Adding Alternative Text on Social Media

When sharing images on the Town’s social media channels, add alternative text to make content accessible to users who are blind or have low vision. Most major platforms allow manual entry of alt text, though it’s not always obvious in the posting workflow. Taking this step ensures that important visual information is available to all residents:

- **Facebook** – Select “Edit Alt Text” after uploading an image
- **Twitter (X)** – Click the “+Alt” button when attaching an image
- **Instagram** – Tap “Advanced Settings” before posting to add alt text
- **LinkedIn** – Use the “Add Alt Text” option when uploading an image

For a detailed, platform-by-platform walk through, see [How to Add Alt Text to Images on Social Media](#) from the **Perkins School for the Blind**.



# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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## Adding Alt-Text to Bulk Uploads of Photos

Alt text (alternative text) is essential for ensuring that images are accessible to residents who use screen readers or have low vision. When working with large batches of images, such as website photo galleries or digital publications, these tools can help automate and streamline the process while allowing for staff review.

- [BIALTY: Bulk Image Alt Text Plugin for WordPress](#) Allows users to apply alt text to multiple images at once using post titles or SEO keywords. Works with most major WordPress themes and page builders
- [AI Alt Text Generator – SEO Toolbelt](#) Uses AI to generate alt text for individual or bulk images. Auto-generated text should be reviewed and edited for accuracy and context
- [Harvard University: Describing Content Images](#) Provides plain-language guidance and examples for writing effective alt text for different types of content, including complex visuals and decorative images

Alt text should be concise, relevant, and clearly describe the purpose or content of each image. These tools support efficiency but should not replace human oversight. Staff uploading or managing digital content should follow established accessibility guidelines to ensure all residents can access the Town's information and services.

# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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## Making PDF Documents More Accessible

PDFs are commonly used by the Town to share information with the public, including reports, forms, and meeting materials. To ensure that all residents can access this content, including those using screen readers or other assistive technologies, PDFs must be properly formatted for accessibility. Accessible PDFs are structured so that the content can be read, navigated, and understood by people with a wide range of abilities. This benefits not only residents with disabilities, but also anyone accessing documents on mobile devices or with limited internet connectivity.

- [Adobe: What is an Accessible PDF?](#) Explains the purpose of accessible PDFs, common barriers in standard PDFs, and how to use tools like Adobe's Accessibility Setup Assistant
- [W3C PDF Accessibility Overview](#) A web accessibility standards resource that provides a high-level summary of how PDFs can meet WCAG 2.1 criteria
- [WebAIM: PDF Accessibility](#) Offers detailed how-to guidance for creating and testing accessible PDFs, including tagging content and evaluating with screen readers

## Core Elements of an Accessible PDF Include:

- Proper document structure using headings, lists, and tables
- Alternative text for all images and meaningful hyperlink text
- Logical reading order and consistent formatting
- Labeled, fillable form fields
- Sufficient color contrast and accessible fonts
- Defined document language and metadata

# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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## Making PDF Documents More Accessible (continued)

When possible, begin accessibility at the source, for example, by structuring Word or InDesign files properly before converting to PDF. Adobe Acrobat's built-in [Accessibility Checker](#) (found under "Tools") can help identify and fix common issues before sharing. For documents already created, consider using the [Make Accessible Action Wizard in Adobe Acrobat Pro](#) or consulting external support tools to retrofit accessibility.

## Building Accessible Forms

Online and fillable PDF forms must be accessible to residents who use screen readers, keyboard navigation, or other assistive technologies. Inaccessible forms can prevent individuals from completing applications, requests, or registrations, creating barriers to participation in Town services.

The following resources provide clear guidance for making forms inclusive and ADA-compliant:

- [Harvard University: Creating Accessible Forms](#) Outlines best practices for building accessible web forms, including labeling fields, ensuring keyboard access, and grouping related inputs
- [WebAIM: Accessible Forms](#) A detailed guide for improving form accessibility across platforms, including error messaging, field instructions, and required field indicators
- [Illinois State University: Creating Accessible Interactive Forms with Adobe Acrobat Pro](#) Step-by-step instructions for making interactive PDF forms accessible using Adobe Acrobat Pro, including proper tagging, labeling, and logical reading order

# Resources, Tools & Tips for Digital Accessibility

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## Building Accessible Forms (continued)

Key elements of an accessible form include:

- Descriptive and programmatically associated labels for each field
- Logical tab order and full keyboard navigability
- Clear instructions and accessible error alerts
- Tagged form fields with readable fonts and sufficient color contrast
- Grouped sections with descriptive headings

Town staff are encouraged to use accessibility checkers built into form platforms, and to test all public-facing forms using a screen reader or keyboard-only navigation before publishing.

## ADA Checklist

Follow [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines](#) (WCAG 2.1 or later) for digital communications

Digital.gov has a guide on [Advanced Approach to Accessibility](#)

The Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management provides a comprehensive audit of ADA accessibility guidelines for municipal government websites.

# Quick Tips for Accessibility

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## **Alternative Text and Image Description**

Alternative text is a textual substitute for non-text content in web pages. Keep it short, usually 1–2 sentences. Consider key elements of why you chose the image, instead of describing every detail.

## **Use Headings**

Use built-in heading tags in Microsoft products to help people with screen readers navigate. Simply bolding things do not help those without sight.

## **Make Lists**

Use the built-in bullet function to mark for screen readers; it will make it easily identifiable as a list.

## **Describe Hyperlinks**

- Instead of “click here,” or a long URL (<https://www....>), use a descriptive version such as, “Web Introduction to Links and Hypertext.”
- Use Camel Case in hashtags (e.g., #TownMeeting) for screen reader compatibility.

## **Plain Language**

- Avoid jargon and acronyms unless necessary, and provide explanations when used.
- Use clear and literal language instead of idioms to ensure messages are universally understood, especially by non-native English speakers or individuals using translation tools.

## **Caption Videos and Provide Translations**

- Ensure all video content includes accurate captions for accessibility by individuals with hearing impairments.
- Offer translations or subtitles in multiple languages where appropriate to reach diverse community members.



# Example Policies

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## **Social Media Policies**

- [Town of Brookline, MA](#)
- [Town of Sandwich, MA](#)
- [City of Pittsfield, MA](#)

## **Communication Plans & Policies**

- [Town of Shrewsbury, MA](#)
- [City of Highland Park, IL](#)
- [City of Grand Rapids, MI](#)

## **Website Governance Policies**

- [US Environmental Protection Agency](#)
- [City of Sacramento, CA](#)
- [Town of Middleton, MA](#)