

Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries

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Abstract:

Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries aim to give practical advice on accessibility and raise awareness of accessibility among public libraries in Finland. The Guidelines are composed by a large group of organisations from the library sector. Also many disability organisations have participated in the process by commenting a draft. The Guidelines is a work in progress. The first part of Guidelines was published June 2015 for public comments. The whole version will be finished in the spring 2016.

Keywords: accessibility, public libraries.

Introduction

Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries is a work in progress. The first part of the guidelines was published in June 2015 as a draft on Finnish Library Association's web page.¹ The first part includes guidelines for leadership and strategy of libraries, collections and materials, customer service, events, and pedagogical activities in libraries. The latter part will include accessibility guidelines for library space, communication and online services. Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries will be finished in the spring 2016 and will be published in both official languages in Finland, Finnish and Swedish.

The Guidelines are composed by a working group which has representatives from various organizations. The working group has had participants so far from Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, Finnish Library Association, Regional State Administrative Agency, Espoo City Library, Helsinki City Library, Celia Library, the Culture for All

¹ Yleisten kirjastojen saavutettavuussuositus, luonnos. [Viewed 2015-06-12]. Available from: http://suomenkirjastoseura.fi/files/julkaisut/Yleisten_kirjastojen_saavutettavuussuositus_LUONNOS.pdf

Service, The Finnish Centre for Easy to Read, The Finnish Diverse Learners' Association, and the Sign Language Library of the Finnish Association of the Deaf. When making the first draft also many disability and minority organizations and authorities have been asked to give comments about the Guidelines.

Why the Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries is needed?

Celia Library for the Print Disabled started a project called Library for All in October 2013. Library for All is a joint project between state-owned Celia Library and public libraries in Finland. The aim of the project is to include talking books produced by Celia Library in the services and collections of public libraries. During the project it was found out that there is little knowledge of accessibility and accessible literature in public libraries. Hence composing Finnish Accessibility Guidelines started as a spin-off from the Library for All project aiming first to compose a checklist for accessibility in public libraries. Soon a checklist turned into wider guidelines concerning various aspects of accessibility.

The aim of the Guidelines is to raise awareness of accessibility in Finnish public libraries and give practical advice how accessibility can be ensured. An accessible library is understood as a library whose services all citizens can use equally despite their disabilities, special needs or minority group status. We hope that by following the Guidelines public libraries could give better service to all library customers and possibly gain new customers, for example people with dyslexia.

Different aspects of accessibility

The Guidelines not only concern with environmental and physical aspects of accessibility or with the accessibility of content (collections and materials), but also with social accessibility. What kind of things should be considered so that all citizens feel welcome to the libraries? One example is an audio book collection which is important for print disabled persons. Providing audio books should be done so that customers can easily find audio books (clear signs) and reach staff if needed (situated close to the information desk). Thus print disabled persons can feel welcome to the library and can feel that libraries provide suitable material also for them.²

Another example of social accessibility are advice on how take into consideration LGBTI groups. For example, the Guidelines say that children's collection should include books that tell about families with two mothers or fathers as well as there should be available books that have disabled children characters. It is also emphasized that keywords used in describing materials should be sensitive and up-to-date.

Aging population and digitalization are also reasons to raise awareness of accessibility. As the Finnish population is aging, the number of people with functional impairments will grow and libraries need to find ways to help elderly citizens to continue to use library services. While digitalization offers new opportunities for public libraries to serve persons with print disabilities (especially technically skilled visually impaired persons), for example with e-books, it is vital that digital contents and online services are accessible. It is important to emphasize for public libraries that it is cost effective to take accessibility into consideration from the beginning when online services are planned and designed.

² See also IFLA Guidelines for Library Services to Persons with Dyslexia - Revised and extended, December 2014. Available from http://www.ifla.org/files/assets/lsn/publications/guidelines-for-library-services-to-persons-with-dyslexia_2014.pdf.

Changes in legislation

Should the proposal on EU directive on the accessibility of public sector bodies' websites proceed, guidelines for accessible websites for public libraries will be needed. There are already available many other accessibility guidelines how to make accessible websites and how to follow Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0. However, there is a need for guidelines connected to the library context and for guidelines that emphasize cognitive accessibility. Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries will focus on these matters.

In Finland a new Non-Discrimination Act came into force in the beginning of 2015. According to the Act, reasonable accommodations have to be made in order to serve disabled persons. Accessibility Guidelines can be used as a tool for making sure that the needs of disabled persons are taken into consideration at libraries.

Finally, Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries is also a way to make a contribution on the on-going discussions of the new Library Act that is currently being drafted in Finland. There are hopes that the new Library Act could include accessibility following Swedish Library Act.

Design for All idea and definitions of accessibility

Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries is based on the Design for All idea. Good design solutions can benefit all users and especially help user groups with special needs. The Guidelines try give good examples of Design for All practices. For example, clear pictograms and icons are easily seen by all users and especially helpful for both persons with learning difficulties and immigrants who do not yet know Finnish language well. Hopefully, the Guidelines will give ideas how to see things from the perspective of various customers and users for all who work at libraries.

The Guidelines will include basic definitions of accessibility and vocabulary. Unfortunately, there is not one word in Finnish language³ for accessibility, but at least two separate words are used. 'Esteettömyys' ('barrier-freedom') is often used when discussing environment and physical accessibility. 'Saavutettavuus' ('approachability') has been often used with web accessibility. The working group chose to use the latter word and there will be explanations of the term in order to make libraries familiar with the accessibility aspects of the term. Otherwise, there is a danger that 'saavutettavuus' is understood in a narrow sense.

The content of the Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries

When the working group started drafting the Guidelines, it was soon decided that the Guidelines should cover all aspects of library activities and services as well as leadership and management of libraries. Hence, one part of the Guidelines discusses leadership and strategies of libraries and is aimed for directors of libraries. Unless the directors are committed to accessibility, it will be hard to ensure accessibility at public libraries.

The Accessibility Guidelines cover both library collections and materials. The emphasis is on accessible books and literature, and advice is given what kind of accessible books libraries should themselves acquire or how public libraries or their customers can use the services of special libraries in Finland. For example, information about the new Sign Language Library which is operating online is given.

The parts that discuss customer service, events, and pedagogical activities in libraries include practical tips and general ideas. For example, there are suggestions on how to communicate

³ In Swedish language, 'tillgänglighet' is a translation to 'accessibility'.

with persons who have difficulties with oral expression, or how chairs without hand-rests should be reserved for sign language interpreters at events. There are also ideas that librarians should include accessible book formats into pedagogical activities like giving book talks.

What is in the near future of Finnish Accessibility Guidelines?

The Accessible Guidelines will also include parts that cover library space, communication and online services. These parts will be composed at the end of 2015 and in the beginning of 2016. The part covering library space can rely on already existing good advice on accessible built environment. The parts covering communication and online services will be more challenging. Luckily, a new project on accessible communication at public libraries will start in the autumn 2015, and that project will be managed at Helsinki City Library by Jaakko Tiinanen who has already been a member in the working group of the Guidelines. The results of the project will and can be taken into the Guidelines.

When the first draft of the Guidelines was made in the spring 2015, the draft was sent to several disability and minority organizations and authorities as well as professionals on library sector. First comments of the draft were in general positive and the feedback confirmed that there indeed is a need for accessibility guidelines. One of the most important comments to the working group was the question of how the Accessibility Guidelines will be put into practice at public libraries. This question shall be considered by the working group during finishing the Guidelines.

What has Celia Library learnt from the Guidelines work?

Very often the process of making something is as important as the result itself. This is also the case with composing Finnish Accessibility Guidelines for Public Libraries. Discussions in the working group have been interesting and inspiring. It has been valuable for Celia Library to make connections with other organizations working with accessibility issues.

Asking comments from a wider network than the working group has been productive. Some of the comments could be taken into guidelines quite directly, for example information about how to borrow literature in the Estonian language in Finland. Some comments brought up for discussion what kind of stories the library collection should contain, which affected the part covering collection. Asking for comments was also a way to advertise and spread knowledge of the coming Accessibility Guidelines for organizations whose comments were asked from.

Based on our experience, Celia Library would encourage other libraries serving persons with print disabilities to write accessibility guidelines for public libraries in co-operation with public libraries, library professionals and disability organizations. Composing accessibility guidelines together with other organizations is a great way to raise the awareness of accessibility and also to learn from other organizations.

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