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**FORTIC PROJECT**

Deliverable

### **D.3.2.3. Inclusion of vulnerable groups**

(english version)

Client / Project lead

**City of Pula - Pola**

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# 1. Introduction

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## 1.1. Purpose and objectives of the Report

This Report has been prepared within the framework of the FORTIC Project as Deliverable D.3.2.3 – *Inclusion of vulnerable groups*, and focuses on the area of the City of Pula – Pola. Its purpose is to provide a comprehensive, professionally grounded and practically applicable analysis of the situation and needs of vulnerable groups in relation to access to cultural content, services, activities and cultural heritage.

The purpose of the Report is to assess the current state of accessibility and inclusion of vulnerable groups in the cultural, social and tourism life of the local community, with particular emphasis on:

- physical accessibility of spaces and infrastructure,
- information and communication accessibility,
- availability of cultural content for persons with different types of disabilities and difficulties,
- social and organisational aspects of inclusion, including attitudes, levels of awareness and intersectoral cooperation.

The Report addresses vulnerable groups both as consumers within tourism and as active local residents and stakeholders, entitled to equal participation in the cultural life of the community. Accessibility is therefore not viewed solely as a technical or infrastructural issue, but as a broader social and developmental process that directly affects social inclusion, quality of life and the sustainable development of the local environment.

The objectives of the Report are to:

- identify key needs, barriers and challenges faced by vulnerable groups in accessing culture and related services,
- analyse existing measures, programmes and examples of good practice at the local level,
- integrate insights gained through expert discussions and workshops conducted within the FORTIC Project,
- and, based on the above, propose concrete and feasible recommendations for improving accessibility, participation and cultural inclusion.

The Report is conceived as an operational tool for decision-makers, public authorities, cultural institutions, tourism stakeholders and civil society organisations, with the aim of systematically and sustainably improving inclusive approaches in the planning, development and implementation of cultural and related public policies.

## 1.2. Definition of vulnerable groups

Within the scope of this Report, the term vulnerable groups refers to social groups that, due to various personal, health-related, social, economic or other circumstances, face an increased risk of exclusion from the cultural, social and tourism life of the community, as well as difficulties in accessing public goods and services.

In line with the objectives of the FORTIC Project, the approach applied in the workshop “*Culture Accessible to All*”, and the analysed documentation and examples of good practice, vulnerable groups considered in this Report include in particular:

- **persons with disabilities**, including persons with physical, sensory (blindness and visual impairment, deafness and hearing impairment), intellectual and multiple disabilities, as well as persons with invisible disabilities,
- **children and young people with developmental difficulties**, including autism spectrum disorders, intellectual disabilities, communication and other developmental difficulties,
- **older persons**, especially those with reduced mobility, chronic illnesses, social isolation or limited financial resources,
- **persons with psychosocial difficulties**, including persons with mental health issues and those at risk of social exclusion,
- **other marginalised groups** who, due to a combination of social, economic, educational or health-related factors, have limited access to cultural content and services.



It is important to emphasise that vulnerability in this context is not defined solely by individual characteristics, but arises from the relationship between the individual and their environment. People become vulnerable when the environment is not adapted to their needs – whether in physical, informational, communicational, organisational or social terms.

The approach applied in this Report is based on a contemporary understanding of disability and vulnerability, which does not focus on the “deficits” of individuals, but on the responsibility of society and systems to remove barriers and enable equal participation of all citizens in cultural, social and tourism life.

### 1.3. The concept of accessibility in this Report

In this Report, accessibility is interpreted in its full, contemporary and interdisciplinary meaning, and not solely as physical access to spaces. Accessibility is understood as a set of prerequisites that enable persons from vulnerable groups to have equal, safe and dignified access to cultural content, services, activities and cultural heritage, without barriers and without the need for exceptional or ad hoc adjustments.

Accessibility in this Report encompasses the following interrelated dimensions:

- **physical accessibility**, which includes access to buildings and spaces (entrances, ramps, lifts, sanitary facilities, internal circulation, accessible routes and evacuation paths),
- **information accessibility**, ensuring that information is available in formats understandable to persons with different types of difficulties (adapted print, digital formats, adequate contrasts, accessible websites),
- **communication accessibility**, which includes adapting communication for persons with hearing, visual, speech and comprehension impairments (sign language, subtitles, easy-to-read and easy-to-understand language, alternative forms of communication),
- **sensory accessibility**, referring to adaptations of spaces and content for persons with sensory processing difficulties (lighting, noise levels, number of stimuli, pace of programme delivery),
- **organisational accessibility**, which relates to programme planning, availability of time slots, pricing, registration procedures and user support,
- **social accessibility**, which refers to attitudes, the level of awareness of staff and the wider public, and the willingness of institutions to actively include vulnerable groups.

Special emphasis in the Report is placed on the following forms of adaptation, in line with the objectives of the FORTIC Project:

- use of sign language,
- application of Braille,
- use of easy-to-read and easy-to-understand language,
- application of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC).

In this document, accessibility is not viewed as an additional or exceptional measure, but as an integral component of the quality of public, cultural and tourism services. It is a prerequisite for equal participation and an indicator of the level of social responsibility and maturity of the community.

The starting point of the Report is that accessibility cannot be achieved through isolated interventions, but through a systematic approach that includes planning, design, implementation, staff training, cooperation with associations and continuous evaluation of the effects of implemented measures.



## 2. Methodology for the preparation of the Report

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### 2.1. Data sources

The Report was prepared on the basis of multiple and mutually complementary data sources, in order to ensure the most comprehensive and objective possible overview of the needs of vulnerable groups, the level of accessibility, and existing practices and challenges in the fields of culture, tourism and related public services.

The following key data sources were used:

- **the workshop “Culture Accessible to All”**, held within the FORTIC Project in the City of Pula, including discussions, practical work and the exchange of experiences among participants,
- **a round table with representatives of public institutions, cultural organisations, associations of vulnerable groups and experts**, focused on accessibility, participation and inclusion,
- documentation submitted by institutions, including:
  - data and reports of the Archaeological Museum of Istria on site accessibility and adapted programmes,
  - materials and descriptions of inclusive programmes of the Pula City Library and Reading Room,
  - materials from the project *“In the Same Movie – One Step Further”*, including research results on the inclusion of children and young people with developmental difficulties in cultural activities,
- **publicly available sources and websites**, of relevant institutions and stakeholders, including:
  - cultural institutions (cinema, theatre, museums),
  - the Tourist Board,
  - the City of Pula and related social programmes,
  - examples of good practice from the local and European context, used as a reference framework for assessing the current situation and formulating recommendations.

All of the above sources were used for the purpose of:

- identifying the real needs of vulnerable groups,
- analysing the existing level of accessibility,
- recognising effective measures and examples of good practice,
- and identifying shortcomings and development potential.

### 2.2. Methods of data processing and analysis

A qualitative analytical approach was applied in the preparation of the Report, focusing on understanding the real needs of vulnerable groups, the functioning of existing accessibility systems, and identifying areas for improvement in the fields of culture, tourism and related public services.

The following methods were applied:

- **document analysis**, including a systematic review of documents submitted by institutions (the Archaeological Museum of Istria, the Pula City Library), materials from the project *“In the Same Movie – One Step Further”*, and other relevant sources,
- **analysis of research results**, using quantitative and qualitative findings from the project *“In the Same Movie – One Step Further”* to better understand actual patterns of inclusion of children and young people with developmental difficulties in cultural activities,
- **qualitative analysis of discussions and participant experiences from the workshop and round table**, synthesising views, challenges and proposals expressed by representatives of institutions, associations, professionals and user groups,
- **analysis of examples of good practice**, with an emphasis on local examples of adapted exhibitions, programmes and spaces, as well as European reference models of accessibility and inclusion,
- **comparative analysis of the existing situation and recommended standards**, assessing the gap between the achieved level of accessibility and targeted inclusive standards.

All collected data were analysed with the aim of:

- identifying key barriers to access to culture and related services,
- recognising structural weaknesses and systemic shortcomings,
- identifying elements that already function as good practice,
- and formulating realistic and feasible recommendations adapted to the local context.



The methodological approach is based on the principles of:

- interdisciplinarity,
- inclusiveness,
- user-centred orientation,
- and alignment with the community's development goals.

### 2.3. Limitations of the Report

This Report represents a professionally grounded snapshot of the situation at the time of its preparation, based on available data, the participation of relevant institutions, the conducted workshop and submitted documentation. Despite efforts to include the widest possible range of experiences and perspectives, certain objective limitations should be noted.

1. The Report is not based on a comprehensive quantitative survey of the entire population, but on a combination of available research data, institutional sources and qualitative insights from process participants. Consequently, the findings primarily reflect the situation and experiences of those institutions and user groups that directly participated or provided relevant data.
2. The level of detail in specific areas depends on the scope and quality of the received documentation, as well as on the availability of participants for active involvement in workshops and discussions. As a result, some areas are addressed in greater depth, while others are treated in a more general manner.
3. The Report does not engage in a legal assessment of compliance of individual facilities or programmes with regulations, but focuses instead on analysing functional accessibility, levels of inclusion and practical opportunities for improvement.

Despite these limitations, the Report provides a relevant and reliable basis for decision-making, as it is grounded in real-life examples, the experiences of users and professional stakeholders, and verified models of good practice in the field of accessibility and inclusion in culture.



## 3. Needs of vulnerable groups – research background

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### 3.1. General barriers to access to culture and tourism

In accessing cultural content, services and activities, vulnerable groups face multilayered and interrelated barriers that go beyond the mere issue of physical access to spaces. An analysis of the submitted research data—particularly the results of the project *“In the Same Movie – One Step Further”*—as well as insights from institutional practice and discussions held during the FORTIC Project workshop, indicate the existence of several key categories of barriers.

#### Physical barriers

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Physical barriers include inaccessible entrances, a lack of ramps and lifts, inadequately adapted sanitary facilities, stairs without alternative solutions, narrow circulation routes, and inaccessible public spaces and approaches. These barriers particularly affect persons with reduced mobility, wheelchair users, older persons and individuals with multiple disabilities. In practice, this often means that formal access to an institution may exist, but the actual use of the space is limited or difficult.

#### Information barriers

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Information barriers are reflected in the lack of information provided in accessible formats, insufficient adaptation of digital content, unclear or inaccessible websites, the absence of clear and understandable instructions, and a lack of basic information regarding the level of accessibility of specific programmes or facilities. For persons with visual or hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities and older persons, such barriers are often decisive in whether they will use a service or attend a cultural event at all.

#### Communication barriers

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Communication barriers include the absence of sign language interpretation, subtitles, easy-to-read and easy-to-understand language, and other forms of adapted communication. These barriers are particularly pronounced for deaf and hard-of-hearing persons, persons with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and individuals with communication difficulties. Without appropriate communication support, access to content remains partial or entirely impossible, even when physical accessibility is ensured.

#### Sensory barriers

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Sensory barriers relate to excessive noise levels, intense lighting, visual overload, a high number of stimuli and unpredictable programme dynamics. Such environments can be particularly challenging for persons with sensory processing disorders, especially children and young people on the autism spectrum. The lack of sensory-friendly time slots and programmes significantly limits their participation in cultural and social life.

#### Organisational and financial barriers

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Organisational barriers include unsuitable programme schedules, complex registration procedures, a lack of on-site support and inconsistent levels of accessibility across institutions. Financial barriers further affect access to cultural content, particularly for persons with low incomes, unemployed individuals, some persons with disabilities and older persons. In practice, ticket prices, transportation costs and associated services often represent an additional barrier to regular participation in cultural activities.

#### Social barriers and attitudes

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One of the most complex categories of barriers relates to attitudes, prejudices and the level of awareness within the surrounding environment. Research findings and practical experience show that some barriers arise from a lack of knowledge, fear of the unfamiliar, uncertainty among institutional staff and the absence of systematic education on working with vulnerable groups. Such barriers can lead to exclusion even when there are no technical or organisational reasons for it.



## Overall impact of barriers

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The cumulative effect of these barriers is reflected in reduced participation of vulnerable groups in cultural and tourism life, limited opportunities for leisure activities, and a sense of isolation and exclusion from the wider community. The consequences are evident not only at the individual level, but also at the community level, which loses the contribution, creative potential and social diversity of its members.

### 3.2. Children and young people with developmental difficulties – patterns of participation and barriers

Children and young people with developmental difficulties represent a particularly sensitive and multiply vulnerable group in the context of access to culture and tourism. Their participation in cultural activities is crucial for cognitive, emotional, social and communication development, as well as for fostering a sense of belonging to the community.

The results of research conducted within the project *“In the Same Movie – One Step Further”*, which included parents of children and young people with developmental difficulties aged 3 to 21, clearly confirm that their level of participation in cultural activities is significantly lower than that of the general population. The research covered participation in cinema screenings, theatre performances, concerts, festivals, exhibitions, museums and various types of creative and artistic workshops.

#### Patterns of participation in cultural events

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The data indicate that children and young people with developmental difficulties participate less frequently in public cultural events, particularly in formal programmes that are not specifically adapted to their needs. The most commonly attended activities are those taking place in familiar, controlled and sensory-adapted environments, while large gatherings, festivals and spatially demanding events are significantly less represented.

Differences in participation are also evident by age group:

- children aged 6 to 10 face the highest number of barriers, primarily due to a combination of age-specific characteristics and the demands of the environment,
- young people aged 16 to 21 more frequently encounter barriers related to physical accessibility, lack of privacy, social discomfort and communication challenges in group activities.

#### Forms of creative and artistic participation

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Participation in workshops (visual arts, music, dance, drama, new media and other creative workshops) shows somewhat more favourable patterns compared to traditional cultural events, particularly when workshops are:

- organised in small groups,
- led by educators trained to work with children with developmental difficulties,
- sensory- and communication-adapted,
- predictable in terms of time and space.

However, significant limitations remain, especially in communities where there are no specialised programmes or partnerships with organisations working with this population.

#### Key barriers from the parents’ perspective

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Parents of children and young people with developmental difficulties most frequently cite the following reasons for reduced participation:

- inaccessible spaces,
- sensory-demanding environments (noise, lighting, crowds),
- lack of adapted forms of communication,
- insufficient information about the actual accessibility of programmes,
- fear of misunderstanding by others and potentially uncomfortable situations,
- insufficient staff preparedness for working with children with developmental difficulties.

It is particularly important to emphasise that some barriers do not relate solely to physical limitations, but to organisational and social conditions that can be systematically improved through staff training, programme adaptation and the active involvement of parents and professionals in programme planning.



## Consequences of reduced participation

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Reduced participation of children and young people with developmental difficulties in cultural activities has long-term consequences, reflected in:

- limited development of social skills,
- fewer opportunities for creative expression,
- feelings of isolation and difference,
- weaker preparation for independent participation in social life in adulthood.

In this sense, accessible cultural programmes for children and young people with developmental difficulties are not merely a matter of service availability, but a crucial instrument for long-term social inclusion and equal life opportunities.

### 3.3. Culture, leisure and social inclusion

Participation in cultural content and leisure activities is one of the fundamental prerequisites for social inclusion, personal development and quality of life for every individual. Culture is not merely a form of entertainment, but a space in which identity, communication skills, social relationships, a sense of belonging to the community and active citizenship are developed.

For vulnerable groups—especially children and young people with developmental difficulties, persons with disabilities and older persons—culture also plays a rehabilitative, therapeutic and integrative role. Through participation in cultural and creative activities, the following are encouraged:

- cognitive and emotional development,
- communication and social skills,
- self-confidence and a sense of self-worth,
- independence and active participation in community life.

Research and practical experience clearly show that exclusion from culture often goes hand in hand with broader forms of social exclusion. When vulnerable groups lack opportunities to participate in cultural life, their visibility in the community decreases, social networks weaken, and existing inequalities deepen.

In this context, leisure time should not be viewed as “residual time” outside educational, work or institutional obligations, but as an active space for social integration. Well-designed cultural programmes enable:

- interaction between different social groups,
- the breaking down of prejudices and stigma,
- the creation of an inclusive social environment,
- the development of empathy and mutual understanding.

It is particularly important to emphasise that the right to participate in cultural life belongs to everyone, regardless of age, health status, disability or socioeconomic background. When the system fails to ensure the conditions for this right, responsibility does not lie with the individual, but with institutions and society as a whole.

From the perspective of sustainable local community development, inclusive culture has multiple positive effects:

- strengthening social cohesion,
- increasing the attractiveness of urban spaces for living and visiting,
- contributing to the development of inclusive tourism,
- fostering active citizenship and participation.

Therefore, accessibility and inclusion in culture cannot be viewed in isolation, but as a strategic development issue that connects culture, social policy, education, tourism and spatial planning. For this reason, this Report approaches vulnerable groups as an integral part of the broader picture of local community development, rather than as a separate social issue.



## 4. Situation analysis in Pula – culture, heritage and public services

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### 4.1. Archaeological Museum of Istria – the actual level of accessibility in practice

The Archaeological Museum of Istria (AMI) is a key cultural institution for the protection, interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage in Pula, and also one of the institutions that has made the most tangible progress in the field of accessibility over the past decade. The analysis of the submitted documentation shows that AMI has approached adaptations in a systematic manner, through infrastructural interventions, programme adjustments and organisational solutions..

#### 4.1.1. Accessibility of the Museum building

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The Archaeological Museum of Istria building, from the basement to the second floor, is accessible to persons with reduced mobility, while the attic level is not accessible to wheelchair users. An accessible sanitary facility is provided, meeting the basic requirements for the use of the building by persons with mobility impairments.

This level of physical accessibility enables basic use of the permanent and temporary exhibitions, but also indicates that accessibility has not yet been fully implemented across all levels of the building.

#### 4.1.2. Accessibility of outdoor archaeological sites

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The analysis of accessibility at outdoor sites shows an uneven situation, influenced by the historical structure of the environment, conservation constraints and the physical characteristics of the terrain:

- Small Roman Theatre – partially accessible; wheelchair users can access the stage area and the orchestra, but not all seating positions. There are no tactile displays, audio guides, sign language interpretation or content in simplified language.
- Temple of Augustus – not accessible to persons with reduced mobility due to high access steps; there is no adapted communication content.
- Nesactium and Betiga – partially accessible; movement is possible along the basic routes, but without tactile, audio or communication adaptations.
- Mosaic sites and smaller locations – access is often difficult due to uneven ground surfaces and non-automated entrances.

These examples clearly show that infrastructural limitations and heritage protection represent objective challenges, while at the same time there is significant scope for developing information and communication accessibility measures that do not require radical interventions in historic fabric.

#### 4.1.3. Gallery spaces

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The accessibility status of AMI's gallery spaces shows different levels of adaptation:

- Gallery Sveta Srca – accessible to persons with reduced mobility; entrances are equipped with ramps, and there is an accessible sanitary facility, an accessible counter, and a tactile orientation plan.
- Gallery C8 – accessible via an entrance ramp, but without an adapted sanitary facility and counter.
- Gallery Amfiteatar – partially accessible; part of the space is not available due to stairs.

While certain forms of physical accessibility are present, tactile exhibit displays, audio guides, sign language interpretation and easy-to-read content are generally not provided systematically, but rather introduced occasionally, depending on the project or exhibition.

#### 4.1.4. Accessibility programmes and the European project COME-IN

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A particularly important step forward in AMI's accessibility work was achieved through participation in the EU project COME-IN! (*Cooperating for Open Access to Museums*), within which the following were implemented:

- installation of access ramps and platforms,
- introduction of tactile displays and Braille captions,
- development of adapted guides,
- staff training,
- cooperation with associations of persons with disabilities.



The project also delivered examples of in-depth sensory and communication adaptation, especially through the exhibitions:

- “Prehistory in Your Hands”,
- “Traces in Time”.

#### 4.1.5. Organisational model and accessibility management

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Within the Archaeological Museum of Istria, a person responsible for accessibility has been appointed, which represents an important organisational advancement. However, the analysis shows that a significant share of adaptations is still implemented in a project-based and reactive manner, most often depending on:

- prior notice from users,
- cooperation with individual associations,
- availability of project funding.

This indicates that accessibility has not yet been fully integrated into the institution’s regular organisational and programme framework, but is instead largely achieved through individual projects and temporary organisational arrangements..

#### 4.1.6. Expert assessment

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In the context of Pula, the Archaeological Museum of Istria represents one of the most advanced examples of an institutional approach to accessibility, with visible results in physical adaptation, sensory accessibility and cooperation with associations.

At the same time, the analysis clearly indicates that:

- accessibility of outdoor sites remains significantly constrained,
- communication accessibility measures are not introduced systematically,
- accessibility is still not fully integrated into regular programme standards.

AMI therefore functions simultaneously as:

- an example of good practice,
- and an illustration of structural limitations faced by cultural institutions in historic environments.

## 4.2. Pula City Library and Reading Room – an example of systematic inclusion

Unlike many cultural institutions where accessibility is primarily developed through individual projects and occasional adaptations, the Pula City Library and Reading Room is an example of social inclusion systematically embedded in the institution’s regular operations. The analysis of submitted documentation indicates a long-term, organisationally grounded and programmatically diverse practice of working with vulnerable groups.

### 4.2.1. Organisational and financial framework of accessibility

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The Library has developed a model of social accessibility through its membership fee policy, removing financial barriers to access:

- children up to 15 years of age have free membership,
- members of associations of persons with disabilities are entitled to free membership,
- pupils, students, pensioners and persons over 65 use reduced membership fees.

This model clearly shows that accessibility is not viewed only through the physical environment, but also through the economic affordability of the service—particularly important for older persons, persons with disabilities and socially sensitive groups.

### 4.2.2. Spatial accessibility and availability of branches

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All branches of the Pula City Library and Reading Room are adapted for persons with reduced mobility, ensuring basic physical access to library services throughout the city. A particular added value of the system includes:

- a **Library Station** in Pula General Hospital, enabling access to library content for users who, due to health conditions, cannot visit library premises,
- the **Reading Room of the Pensioners’ Club**, as an example of a service adapted to older persons within their everyday environment.
- the **“Book on Call” service**, intended for persons living in the area of the City of Pula who, due to limited or reduced mobility, are unable to visit the Library independently.



#### 4.2.3. Programmes for children and persons with difficulties

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The Library implements a range of targeted programmes for children with developmental difficulties and persons with psychosocial difficulties, including:

- reading practice workshops for children who acquire reading skills more slowly,
- a reading club for children and young people with difficulties,
- a reading club for adults with psychosocial difficulties.

These programmes provide not only access to content, but also continuous social interaction, the development of self-confidence and a sense of belonging to the community, making them substantially more valuable than occasional inclusive activities.

#### 4.2.4. Digital accessibility and contemporary forms of use

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The Pula City Library systematically invests in digital accessibility of content through:

- digital collections,
- e-books,
- online databases,
- remote access to information.

Digital accessibility is particularly important for:

- persons with reduced mobility,
- older persons,
- users who, due to health-related, spatial or social circumstances, cannot regularly visit library premises.

In this sense, digital infrastructure is not an add-on, but an equal channel for access to cultural and educational content.

#### 4.2.5. Professional education and the Library's social role

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The Library regularly organises:

- workshops,
- lectures,
- exhibitions,
- round tables and professional events focused on inclusion, social sensitivity and work with vulnerable groups.

In doing so, the Library acts not only as a service provider, but also as an active driver of social change and awareness raising within the community

#### 4.2.6. Expert assessment

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The Pula City Library and Reading Room is one of the rare examples in which inclusion is clearly integrated into everyday operations, rather than achieved exclusively through projects or exceptional activities. Its key strengths are:

- a systematic approach,
- a combination of physical, social, programme-based and digital accessibility,
- long-term sustainability of the model.

This example demonstrates that it is possible to develop a stable, sustainable and inclusive cultural system within regular budgetary and organisational frameworks, without relying solely on occasional project-based funding.

### 4.3. Examples of in-depth cultural adaptation – “Prehistory in Your Hands” and “Traces in Time”

The exhibition projects “**Prehistory in Your Hands**” and “**Traces in Time**”, implemented by the Archaeological Museum of Istria, represent examples of a high level of in-depth cultural adaptation that goes beyond the classic understanding of accessibility as merely physical access to space. These projects show how cultural heritage can be made genuinely accessible to persons with severe sensory impairments—especially persons with visual impairments—without undermining professional, scientific or conservation standards.



#### 4.3.1. Tactile accessibility and adaptation of exhibition content

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Within these exhibitions, the following were developed:

- tactile replicas of artefacts adapted for touch,
- tactile diagrams and relief displays,
- Braille captions,
- adapted texts with increased contrast.

This enabled persons with visual impairments to experience cultural heritage directly through touch, rather than solely through verbal description.

#### 4.3.2. A multisensory approach and expansion of the concept of accessibility

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The exhibitions were not adapted exclusively for persons with visual impairments, but designed as multisensory displays that incorporate:

- touch,
- sound,
- adapted lighting,
- spatial orientation elements.

This approach enabled the inclusion of persons with other types of sensory difficulties, as well as children, young people and older persons without disabilities, achieving a genuinely universal approach to exhibition design.

#### 4.3.3. Adapted guides and communication accessibility

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The exhibitions included:

- guides in Braille,
- adapted printed guides,
- interpretive materials designed for persons with different levels of perception and understanding.

In this way, communication accessibility was ensured and visitors from vulnerable groups were not dependent solely on third-party assistance.

#### 4.3.4. Involving persons with disabilities in content creation

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A particular value of these exhibitions is that persons with disabilities were included not only as users, but also as active participants in the content creation process. In certain segments, the blind artist Emil Mandarić also contributed, further strengthening the principle: **“Nothing about us without us.”**

This model ensures:

- relevance of adaptations,
- authenticity of experience,
- greater trust from user groups,
- a higher level of maturity in inclusive practice.

#### 4.3.5. Professional and social value of such projects

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The exhibitions *“Prehistory in Your Hands”* and *“Traces in Time”* demonstrate that it is:

- possible to achieve full sensory and communication accessibility,
- possible to maintain a high scientific and museological standard,
- possible to meet the needs of vulnerable groups and the general public at the same time.

Such projects have multiple impacts:

- raising the quality of museum presentation,
- raising awareness of the needs of persons with disabilities,
- strengthening the inclusive character of cultural institutions,
- laying foundations for the development of accessible cultural tourism.



#### 4.3.6. Expert assessment

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The in-depth adaptations delivered by the Archaeological Museum of Istria through these exhibition projects may be considered reference examples of good practice at both national and European levels. At the same time, their implementation shows that such adaptations are:

- complex,
- financially demanding,
- and most often dependent on project funding rather than regular programme budgets.

This further confirms the need for a more systematic financial and institutional framework for developing accessibility in culture, which is one of the key issues further addressed through the recommendations in this Report.

#### 4.4. Other relevant institutions and sectors – culture, tourism and social services

In addition to the Archaeological Museum of Istria and the Pula City Library and Reading Room, a range of other institutions and programmes operate in Pula that, each in its own field, contribute to increased accessibility and inclusion of vulnerable groups. Their analysis provides an overview of the broader institutional framework and the level of intersectoral connectivity in the areas of culture, tourism and social services.

##### 4.4.1. Kino Valli – sensory screenings and inclusive film programmes

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Kino Valli is one of the most recognisable examples of inclusive cultural practice in Pula, particularly through sensory film screenings intended for children, young people and adults with sensory integration difficulties, autism spectrum disorders and other developmental difficulties.

The concept of sensory film screenings at Kino Valli was initiated as early as 2016 by Dr Eva Brlek, PhD, a professor of educational rehabilitation and psychotherapist, and Sandra Malenica, a professor of Croatian language and comparative literature, thereby establishing the foundation for the long-term development of this practice in Pula.

Sensory screenings include:

- adaptation of sound and lighting levels,
- more flexible behavioural rules in the venue (movement, vocalisations),
- a clear and predictable programme structure,
- cooperation with associations and professionals.

This approach enables participation for groups that are often completely excluded in conventional cinema environments. Practical experience confirms high acceptance among users and their families, as well as a positive impact on raising awareness among the wider public about diverse audience needs.

##### 4.4.2. Istrian National Theatre – City Theatre of Pula (INK)

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Through its programmes and activities, the Istrian National Theatre – City Theatre of Pula demonstrates the potential of theatre as a space for social reflection, participation and inclusion. Particularly notable are:

- the Drama and Dance Studio, bringing together children, young people, adults and pensioners,
- Forum Theatre, based on the methods of the Theatre of the Oppressed, encouraging active involvement of participants in discussions on social topics.

Although accessibility of theatre spaces and programmes has not yet been systematically ensured in all aspects (e.g., sign language interpretation, subtitles, audio description), there is a clear programme and values framework that recognises the importance of including diverse social groups

##### 4.4.3. Tourist Board Pula – Pola – accessibility in tourism

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The Tourist Board Pula – Pola highlights accessibility information on its website, recognising the importance of an inclusive approach to tourism content. This step is important because it enables:

- better information for tourists with disabilities and their families,
- visibility of accessible content and services,
- strengthening Pula's image as an inclusive destination.



However, the analysis shows that accessibility in tourism is still predominantly informational in nature, while further development is needed in:

- accessible cultural and thematic tours,
- systematic training for tourism professionals,
- stronger links between cultural institutions and the tourism sector.

#### 4.4.4. The City of Pula – Pola – social and infrastructure programmes

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The City of Pula – Pola implements a range of measures and programmes that indirectly, yet significantly, contribute to accessibility and inclusion of vulnerable groups in everyday city life, including:

- **the Eurokey system** and a network of accessible sanitary facilities,
- **adapted public transport**, with buses accessible to persons with disabilities,
- **educational support programmes** for children with difficulties,
- **social programmes and services**, including the Support Centre CP521,
- **a home-help programme** (*hrv. gerontodomaćice*) for older and frail persons.

These programmes create the basic preconditions for mobility, independence and social inclusion, without which participation in cultural and tourism activities would not be possible.

#### 4.4.5. Expert assessment of the intersectoral framework

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The analysis of the above institutions and programmes indicates that in Pula there are:

- a number of high-quality individual initiatives,
- clear awareness of the importance of accessibility,
- examples of good practice in culture and social services.

At the same time, it is evident that:

- initiatives often operate in parallel rather than within a unified strategy,
- cooperation between culture, tourism and social services is not yet fully institutionalised,
- accessibility in tourism lags behind the level of accessibility developed in certain cultural institutions.

This chapter clearly points to the need for stronger cross-sectoral cooperation and the development of an integrated approach to accessibility, which is essential for long-term, sustainable comprehensive social inclusion in the field of culture and related public services.



## 5. Insights from the round table and the workshop “Culture Accessible to All”

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The workshop “**Culture Accessible to All**”, held on 25 November 2025 at Coworking Pula, was delivered within the FORTIC Project with the aim of opening a structured, expert and participatory dialogue on accessibility, inclusion and the participation of vulnerable groups in culture. The workshop brought together representatives of public institutions, local and regional government, cultural organisations, civil society organisations, and experts in architecture, pedagogy and culture, ensuring an interdisciplinary perspective.

The programme was structured into a round table and a practical segment, enabling the topic of accessibility to be examined from user, institutional, professional and governance perspectives.

### 5.1. Round table – accessibility, participation and inclusion

The round table, moderated by Dr. sc. Vanja Marković, focused on identifying key barriers faced by persons with disabilities, older persons and other groups at risk of social exclusion. The discussion involved representatives of cultural institutions and civil society organisations actively developing accessible and inclusive cultural programmes.

It was emphasised that accessibility does not relate solely to the physical adaptation of spaces, but also includes communication, information availability, organisational models and institutional attitudes. A particular emphasis was placed on the difference between equality and equity, highlighting that genuine inclusion requires adaptations that respond to diverse user needs, rather than identical conditions for all.

The round table also presented specific examples of good practice from Pula that already contribute to removing barriers to culture and developing inclusive cultural content:

- **the Archaeological Museum of Istria** (Đeni Gobić-Bravar), through exhibition adaptations, the development of sensory and tactile content, and participation in European projects focused on accessibility,
- **Kino Valli** (Nataša Šimunov), through the organisation of sensory film screenings intended for persons with sensory integration difficulties,
- **the Istrian National Theatre – City Theatre of Pula** (Luka Mihovilić), through the Drama and Dance Studio and forum theatre as a participatory form of cultural expression,
- **civil society organisations** (Marino Jurcan, Metamedij Association), which, through long-standing experience, highlight real user needs and the importance of continuous cooperation with institutions.

The discussion showed that Pula already has significant knowledge, experience and motivation for developing inclusive culture, but also that many positive practices are the result of individual initiatives, personal engagement and project-based activities, rather than a systematically established institutional framework. Participants agreed that long-term sustainability requires stronger coordination, knowledge exchange and the early integration of accessibility into the planning of cultural programmes and projects.

### 5.2. Practical segment – workshop – implementation of horizontal principles

The second part of the programme consisted of a practical workshop led by Boris Iharoš, architect and expert in accessibility and inclusive design. The focus was on applying the principles of accessibility and inclusion in the planning and design of public and cultural spaces.

Participants were specifically alerted to the fact that in Croatia approximately 17% of the population are persons with different types of disabilities, with a significant share of disabilities being invisible—further underscoring the need for a broader understanding of accessibility within professional processes.

Through practical tasks and the exchange of experiences, the principle was emphasised:

“Nothing about us without us,” meaning the active involvement of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in all phases of planning, design and evaluation of spaces, services and programmes intended for the public.



### 5.3. Key insights and messages from the workshop

Based on discussions, practical work and experience-sharing during the workshop, several key insights were identified that have direct and long-term relevance for planning and implementing projects in culture, tourism and public services.

#### **Accessibility is decided in the project preparation phase**

One of the strongest and most consistent insights is that the level of real accessibility is largely defined during the preparation phase. Decisions made while drafting the project brief, defining objectives, identifying users and setting the basic concept have a decisive impact on whether accessibility will be meaningfully integrated or reduced to late, limited adjustments. Practice shows that most accessibility problems stem from insufficiently considered early decisions.

#### **The difference between formal and real accessibility**

The workshop clearly highlighted the difference between formal compliance with minimum legal and technical requirements and real, user-oriented accessibility. Compliance does not guarantee that a space, service or cultural content will truly be accessible and used by all groups. Real accessibility arises from understanding user experience, diverse needs and so-called invisible barriers, which often remain overlooked in standard project procedures.

#### **The role of professionals in the preparation phase as the key carrier of quality**

Particular emphasis was placed on the responsibility of designers, planners and other professionals involved in project preparation. Their role is not limited to technical implementation of prescribed requirements, but includes actively recognising user needs, asking the right questions and steering the process toward solutions that enable equal participation. The quality of decisions made at this stage directly determines functionality, long-term value and the project's social impact.

#### **Accessibility as a matter of dignity and the quality of public space**

Workshop participants recognised that accessibility is not a matter of special solutions for specific groups, but a fundamental issue of dignity, equality and the quality of public space and services. Projects developed from an accessibility perspective are generally better for all users, more resilient to changes in use and more sustainable in the long term.

#### **User participation as a prerequisite for high-quality solutions**

The principle *"Nothing about us without us"* was confirmed as a practical and operational tool. Actively involving persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in the phases of planning, design and evaluation enables realistic, functional and sustainable solutions, and strengthens trust between institutions and users.

### 5.4. Professional value of the workshop within the FORTIC Project

Within the FORTIC Project, the workshop "Culture Accessible to All" represents a key bridge between the analysis of the current situation and the formulation of future recommendations. It enabled the connection of theoretical accessibility concepts with concrete experiences of local institutions and users, providing a solid basis for further strategic steps.



## 6. Identified limitations and structural challenges

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The analysis of the current situation, institutional practices, implemented programmes, and insights gained through the workshop and round table show that Pula has a number of valuable initiatives and examples of good practice in the field of accessibility and the inclusion of vulnerable groups in the cultural life of the community. At the same time, structural limitations and systemic challenges have been identified that constrain their reach, continuity and long-term sustainability.

### 6.1. Fragmentation of initiatives and the absence of a unified framework

One of the fundamental challenges is that accessibility in culture, tourism and public services is being developed through individual, often unconnected initiatives. Although high-quality examples exist across different institutions, they:

- operate in parallel,
- are not systematically connected to one another,
- lack a shared strategic framework.

As a result, the level of accessibility varies across institutions and sectors, and opportunities for transferring knowledge and experience remain limited. Without a clear framework, accessibility continues to depend on individuals and projects rather than being embedded in the system.

### 6.2. Reliance on project-based rather than systemic funding

The analysis shows that the most significant advances in accessibility are achieved through project activities, often financed by national or European funds. This model enables innovation and pilot projects, but also generates several challenges:

- limited duration of adaptations,
- lack of continuity after the project ends,
- difficulties in planning long-term activities.

In this way, accessibility is perceived as an added value rather than as a standard component of institutions' regular operations, which ultimately limits its sustainability.

### 6.3. Insufficient integration of accessibility in the early planning stages

One of the key structural challenges identified in this Report is that accessibility is still considered too late in a large number of projects—most often during the design phase or immediately before implementation. Such an approach results in solutions focused on corrections and retrofits rather than on a systematic understanding of user needs from the outset.

Unclear definition of target users, the absence of a needs assessment, and limited early involvement of accessibility experts often lead to situations where only minimal, formal adjustments can be achieved later.

This planning model has multiple negative effects:

- increasing the costs of subsequent interventions,
- reducing functionality and overall quality of solutions,
- limiting the possibility of genuine inclusion of vulnerable groups,
- creating a gap between formal compliance and real usability.

A particular challenge is that accessibility is often perceived as a technical or regulatory issue rather than a fundamental project decision. This neglects the broader context of how spaces and services are used and the actual user experience, especially for persons with invisible disabilities and complex needs.

In the absence of clear procedures and obligations to integrate accessibility at the preparation stage, the quality of solutions largely depends on the experience, awareness and personal commitment of individual professionals. This further confirms the need to shift from a reactive model of retrofits to a proactive, integrated planning model in which accessibility is an integral part of the project brief, concept and decision-making process.



## 6.4. Insufficient early integration of conservation requirements within the accessibility context

The analysis conducted in this Report, as well as informal expert insights exchanged during the workshop, indicate an additional structural challenge in projects implemented within protected areas and on cultural heritage assets.

In such projects, conservation requirements are often addressed separately from accessibility—and frequently only in later stages of preparation. As a result, the protection of cultural heritage and full accessibility requirements are perceived as conflicting rather than complementary objectives.

This sequential approach makes it difficult to develop high-quality solutions, as key project decisions are made without considering all obligations arising from contemporary European policies, including the obligation to ensure full accessibility for all users.

Especially in environments with a high share of protected buildings and zones, such as Pula and the wider Istrian region, the absence of early dialogue between investors, designers and conservation services represents a risk for successful project preparation.

Accessibility is not a matter of project policy, financial model or individual professional judgement. It is a fundamental right and an obligation derived from national legislation and international conventions applied by the Republic of Croatia. In this sense, solutions must be found in every project—even in the most demanding protected contexts—because dignity and equality of users have no acceptable alternative.

## 6.5. Limited communication and information accessibility

Although a satisfactory level of physical accessibility has been achieved in some institutions, the analysis shows that communication and information aspects are often neglected. This includes:

- lack of information in accessible formats,
- absence of sign language interpretation, subtitles and audio description,
- insufficiently clear information on the actual accessibility level of programmes and spaces.

For many users, these barriers are decisive in whether they participate, meaning that physical accessibility alone is not sufficient.

## 6.6. Insufficient training and support for staff

Practical experience and workshop insights show that employees in cultural and public institutions often demonstrate high motivation, but also uncertainty when working with vulnerable groups. The reasons include:

- lack of specific knowledge and skills,
- fear of making mistakes,
- absence of systematic training and mentoring.

Without continuous training, accessibility remains limited to formal measures instead of becoming an integral part of organisational culture.

## 6.7. Insufficient involvement of users in decision-making processes

Although cooperation with associations and users is occasionally established, it often lacks a structured and continuous character. The involvement of persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups in planning and evaluation is still carried out sporadically—most often at the level of consultation rather than genuine co-decision.

This results in missed opportunities to:

- develop more functional solutions,
- strengthen trust between institutions and users,
- create sustainable and relevant programmes.



## 6.8. Challenges in linking culture and tourism

Although the City of Pula – Pola has a strong cultural and tourism identity, the analysis shows that accessibility in culture and accessibility in tourism are still insufficiently connected. Cultural institutions and the tourism sector often operate in separate systems, without joint planning and development of inclusive products and services.

This limits the potential for:

- developing accessible cultural tourism,
- extending the tourism season,
- strengthening the city's international recognition as an inclusive destination.

## 6.9. Summary of structural challenges

The identified challenges indicate that the key problem is not a lack of individual initiatives, but rather:

- the absence of a systemic approach,
- insufficient sector coordination,
- limited institutional integration of accessibility.

This chapter provides the basis for the next step of the Report: defining concrete recommendations and guidelines aimed at creating a sustainable, coordinated and inclusive system.



## 7. Recommendations for improving accessibility and participation in culture

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Based on the conducted analysis, research background, institutional insights, and the conclusions of the workshop and round table, the following recommendations are proposed to systematically improve accessibility and participation in culture in the City of Pula. The recommendations are structured to be realistic, gradually implementable and adaptable to the local context, with the possibility of integration into existing strategic and operational documents.

### 7.1. Establishment of a unified strategic framework for accessibility in culture

It is recommended to develop a local strategic framework or action plan for accessibility in culture that would:

- define common objectives and priorities,
- establish minimum accessibility standards,
- ensure coordination between the cultural, social and tourism sectors.

Such a framework would enable a shift from fragmented initiatives toward a systematic and long-term approach, with clearly defined responsibilities and measurable objectives.

### 7.2. Integration of accessibility into early planning and programming phases

To avoid the practice of late and limited adaptations, accessibility must be systematically integrated into the early phases of project planning and preparation. This includes the period before the start of design, when objectives, target users, programme requirements and the basic project concept are defined.

At this stage, accessibility should not be viewed as an additional technical requirement, but as a project quality criterion that directly affects functionality, sustainability and social impact. Projects in which the needs of different user groups are clearly identified and embedded in the project brief generally achieve a higher level of real accessibility and long-term value.

In this context, it is recommended to:

- involve accessibility and inclusive design experts at the stage of drafting the project brief,
- clearly define target users and scenarios for the use of spaces and services,
- consider communication, sensory and organisational accessibility on an equal footing with physical accessibility,
- plan adaptations as an integral part of the core concept, rather than as subsequent interventions.

Designers, planners and project managers play a particularly important role in this process. During the preparation phase, they have both the opportunity and the responsibility to steer projects toward solutions that ensure genuine user inclusion. Their professional judgement and ability to integrate diverse requirements are crucial for achieving high-quality and functional outcomes.

Integrating accessibility in early planning phases enables:

- rational use of financial resources,
- reduced need for later corrections,
- greater flexibility in the use of spaces and programmes,
- higher levels of user satisfaction.

This approach is a fundamental prerequisite for shifting from a reactive adaptation model to a proactive model of inclusive planning, ensuring that accessibility becomes part of standard practice rather than an exception.

### 7.3. Development of communication and information accessibility

Systematic improvement of communication accessibility is recommended through:

- availability of information in multiple formats (easy-to-read language, increased contrast, audio formats),
- gradual introduction of sign language interpretation, subtitles and audio description,
- clear and transparent information on the actual level of accessibility of spaces and programmes.

Communication accessibility is essential for informed user decision-making and has a direct impact on participation levels.



## 7.4. Continuous staff training and strengthening organisational culture

To ensure that accessibility becomes an integral part of everyday practice, it is recommended to:

- introduce regular training programmes for staff of cultural and public institutions,
- develop internal guidelines and protocols for working with vulnerable groups,
- encourage the exchange of experience and examples of good practice between institutions.

Training should focus not only on technical aspects, but also on developing sensitivity, communication skills and an understanding of user perspectives.

## 7.5. Systematic involvement of vulnerable groups in decision-making processes

The principle “**Nothing about us without us**” should become operational rather than merely declarative. It is recommended to:

- include representatives of vulnerable groups in advisory bodies and working groups,
- conduct consultations during the planning and evaluation phases of programmes,
- promote participatory models of cultural practice.

Such an approach increases the relevance of solutions and strengthens trust between institutions and users.

## 7.6. Strengthening intersectoral cooperation between culture, tourism and social services

Accessibility in culture should be viewed as part of a broader system that includes:

- mobility and public transport,
- social services and support,
- tourism infrastructure and information.

It is recommended to develop joint initiatives and projects that connect cultural content with accessible tourism and social services, creating a coherent and user-oriented system.

## 7.7. Ensuring continuity of funding for accessibility

To reduce reliance on individual projects, it is recommended to:

- plan funding for accessibility within institutions’ regular budgets,
- combine local, national and European funding sources,
- recognise accessibility as an investment in quality and sustainability rather than as an additional cost.

Continuity of funding is essential for long-term impact and the stability of achieved adaptations.

## 7.8. Monitoring, evaluation and visibility of results

It is recommended to establish a monitoring system that will:

- enable evaluation of the impacts of implemented measures,
- collect user feedback,
- ensure visibility of achievements and continued motivation of institutions.

Regular monitoring and evaluation allow for the adjustment of measures and continuous improvement of the system.

## 7.9. Summary of recommendations

The proposed recommendations are aimed at:

- strengthening systematisation and coordination,
- raising the quality of accessibility in all its dimensions,
- creating an inclusive cultural and social environment in the long term.

Their implementation requires political will, professional support and intersectoral cooperation, but also represents an investment in social cohesion, quality of life and the sustainable development of the City of Pula.



## 8. Conclusion

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This Report demonstrates that the City of Pula – Pola does not lack knowledge, experience or goodwill in the field of accessibility and inclusion in culture. On the contrary, numerous examples of good practice, institutional advances and professional capacities have been identified that already enable the creation of more accessible and inclusive cultural, social and tourism content.

At the same time, the analysis clearly confirms that the main challenge is systemic rather than individual in nature. Accessibility is still largely achieved through projects, exceptions and the personal commitment of individuals, instead of being embedded in regular planning, management and funding processes. Such an approach limits the reach of existing initiatives and makes them vulnerable to changes in financial, organisational and staffing conditions.

The workshop “Culture Accessible to All” confirmed that there is a clear willingness among stakeholders to change ways of thinking and acting, but also that such change requires a clear framework. Participants recognised that key advances are not achieved by adding isolated adaptations, but by integrating accessibility into early decision-making phases, into the organisational culture of institutions, and into intersectoral cooperation.

In practical terms, this Report points to several unequivocal conclusions:

- accessibility must become a standard component of planning, rather than a corrective measure,
- cultural institutions, tourism and social services must operate as an interconnected system,
- users and vulnerable groups must be active participants, not passive recipients of services,
- investment in accessibility is an investment in quality, sustainability and community resilience.

The City of Pula – Pola has a real opportunity to connect existing examples of good practice into a coherent and long-term sustainable model of accessible culture—one that does not depend on individual projects or individuals, but on clearly defined rules and responsibilities. This not only increases access to cultural content, but also strengthens social cohesion, improves the quality of life for local residents and enhances the city’s competitiveness as an inclusive destination.

In conclusion, accessibility in culture is not an added value, but a fundamental prerequisite for equal participation in the community. This Report provides a clear analytical and operational basis for the next step—moving from good intentions to systemic, measurable and lasting change.

If accessibility remains a project-based exception, its impact will always be limited. If it becomes a system, the City of Pula – Pola can become a regional reference point for inclusive culture.

