

Avila: The Access City of 2011

Avila, a Spanish city known for its medieval walls, won the first-ever European award for improving access for people with disabilities. The European Commission awarded Avila in December the Access City Award 2011. The annual honour aims to award efforts to improve accessibility in the urban environment and to foster equal participation of people with disabilities.



The Commission praised Avila's plan, developed since 2002, to improve accessibility to public buildings and to give incentives for private initiatives. It has also developed accessible tourism facilities and improved job opportunities for people with disabilities – working directly with disabled and elderly people's organisations.

Commission Vice-President Viviane Reding, the EU's Justice Commissioner, and Her Royal Highness Princess Astrid of Belgium presented the award at a ceremony in Brussels on the occasion of the European Day of People with Disabilities (3 December). It is one of the actions under the Commission's new strategy for a barrier-free Europe for disabled people.

"I would like to congratulate Avila and the other finalist cities for their commitment to a barrier-free urban environment," said Vice-President Viviane Reding, the EU's Justice Commissioner. "People with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else, but accessibility is a precondition for them to enjoy those rights. That is why we have placed it at the centre of our strategy for building a barrier-free Europe. The Access City Award gives recognition to those cities which have shown the most effort to improving accessibility. This honour should inspire and motivate cities that still have more progress to make."

The Access City Award aims to promote accessibility initiatives in European cities. It recognises efforts and achievements in improving accessibility in four main areas: the built environment and public spaces; transport and related infrastructures; information and communication (including information and communication technologies); and public facilities and services.

The European jury selected Avila because of its comprehensive plan, the high level of political commitment, the progress achieved so far, and the effective involvement of people with disabilities in the process.

The Commission launched the competition for the first Access City Award in July 2010. EU cities with over 50,000 people, of which there are just over 1000, could submit applications. The Commission reviewed 66 eligible applications from 19 Member States.

A Europe-wide jury then selected four finalists: Avila, Barcelona (Spain), Cologne (Germany) and Turku (Finland). The other three finalists have also developed comprehensive plans to address accessibility in the competition's four areas:

Barcelona follows a "design for all" approach to improving accessibility with a strong focus on the built environment and transport facilities, including accessible ticketing machines designed with the involvement of disabled people.

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Cologne has shown a strong political commitment to improving accessibility since 2004, involving a wide range of city departments with clear responsibilities and extensive coordination, including special training for designers in city departments and building supervision employees.

Turku's comprehensive accessibility programme constitutes an effective strategy with a strong involvement of people with disabilities for a smaller historical city confronted with challenging conditions for accessibility, particularly in the built environment.

<http://www.accesscityaward.eu>

<http://europa.eu>

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