

State of the eNation Reports April 2005 – Political Parties

State of the eNation Reports – a summary

The AbilityNet State of the eNation Reports are a quarterly review of a number of websites in a particular sector.

This report concerns the accessibility and usability of the websites of 10 of the UK political parties. They have been chosen by number of seats held in the House of Commons at the last election.

The idea of this report isn't to 'name and shame', but rather to highlight the current state of play – what level of access can the many millions of voters who have a disability, dyslexia, or who simply can't use a mouse very well expect when visiting these sites?

Web Accessibility – why it's important

Today many services are only available, or offered at a discounted rate, on the Internet. Other sites, such as those of political parties, provide vital information. If a website doesn't meet a base level of accessibility then it will be impossible for a large number of disabled visitors to use it. Many others with some sort of limiting condition will also have great difficulty.

It is illegal to bar disabled visitors from on-line services (including information) offered to the general public. No organisation would purposefully do this but many are either not aware of the problem, or don't know what to do to address it. In the UK there are estimated to be 1.6 million registered blind people, 1.5 million with cognitive difficulties, a further 3.4 million people who are otherwise IT disabled and 6 million that have dyslexia. The total spending power of this group is now estimated at £120 billion a year.

A Commitment to Accessibility

All the parties reviewed were contacted three months before publication of this report and asked to make a public commitment to accessibility. To date the following have done this (please see Appendix C for the text of these statements):

- Conservatives
- Labour
- Scottish Nationalist Party
- Liberal Democrats

Political Party Websites – in summary

A 5 star scale was used: * = Very inaccessible
 *** = Satisfies a base level of accessibility
 ***** = Very accessible.

10 sites were reviewed: 1 site had a **** ranking
 3 sites had a *** ranking
 6 sites had a ** ranking
 1 site had a * ranking

For information on how we decide a site’s ranking please see Appendix B.

Website Audit – The findings

All sites were audited for accessibility and usability with the aid of Watchfire's accessibility testing solution ‘Bobby WorldWide’ and a wide range of manual checks.

Conservative Party - www.conservatives.com

Ranking: ***

The Conservative Party website was almost awarded a **** ranking. Certain issues, however, that will hinder some visitors from being able to gain effective access deprived it of this score:

Whilst the pages on this site have a lot of content, page elements are sufficiently separated with white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment and dyslexia. Although the text is sans serif (again assisting these groups) certain text and links are too small under normal viewing conditions. A text size picker is included – but even on its largest setting news story text is still small.

Whilst the Text on every page can be resized by the user – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen, images of text have, however, been used in places meaning that the user cannot resize this text, or change its colour.

Often a text label appears when you put the mouse over an image. Blind and dyslexic visitors rely on the presence of text labels as a spoken description of the image. Without them the image is meaningless. All the images on this website have been

labelled – although numerous invisible spacer images on every page have also been labelled which add much ‘auditory clutter’ for blind users relying upon speech output.

The colours used on the site always afford good contrast between text and background. However, the dark background means that a keyboard user (pressing Tab to move through links) will struggle to see which link is active. Many links are also not underlined or otherwise indicated, making it difficult for visitors to tell which text is a link – important for general usability but especially for those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability.

The site includes a number of Flash movies - which can include animated or interactive content or functionality. Despite recent improvements in the accessibility of such page items, the vast majority of visitors who cannot use a mouse, are vision-impaired, or use speech output or voice recognition software will not be able to access this content, and its movement may distract those with a cognitive impairment.

Many websites use mini programs called JavaScript embedded in their pages which can often cause difficulties for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons. This website, however, is fully functional when JavaScript is not supported (including the online shop).

Labour Party - www.labour.org.uk

Ranking: ****

Labour’s website is the first site we have ever awarded a **** ranking. However, it still has some minor issues that will present difficulties for some visitors:

Pages are clear and uncluttered with sans serif text - which makes reading much easier for many groups. Some text and links, however, are a little small under normal viewing conditions which may cause difficulties for some visitors with a vision impairment, dyslexia or who are viewing the site on a small screen.

Text headings are properly coded so that blind users can get a summary of the page and quickly jump to the desired section.

Whilst the Text on every page can be resized by the user – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen, there are, however, a few instances of images of text meaning that the user cannot resize this text, or change its colour.

The colours used on the site always afford good contrast between text and background. However the choice of colours for the links at the top of the page means that a keyboard user (pressing Tab to move through links) will struggle to see which link is active.

When white text on a black background is imposed (the colour combination of choice for many visitors with a vision impairment) the map on the home page disappears. The links in this map are, however, repeated elsewhere on the page.

All images on the site are well labelled – so vital for blind visitors, someone using voice recognition software or a text only browser, or someone with dyslexia relying on speech.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported the site still works fully (including the online shop), - an essential feature for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Liberal Democrats Party - www.libdems.org.uk

Ranking: **

The website of the Liberal Democrats Party has a number of issues that will make it difficult for many visitors:

The pages on this site are quite cluttered which may cause difficulties for those with a vision impairment or dyslexia. Whilst text is sans serif (making reading easier for some groups) certain text and links are too small under normal viewing conditions.

Much of the text resizes with the user's preference, some text, however, has been "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen. Images of text have also been used instead of actual text. This means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour.

The majority of images on this site have appropriate text labels, assisting blind visitors and those with dyslexia who rely on speech output.

In general the colours used on the site afford good contrast between text and background. However the choice of white text on a yellow background for the links on the left of the page will cause difficulties for visitors with a vision impairment or dyslexia.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported most of the site still functions as normal. However you are no longer able to sign in to access the online shop – denying this functionality for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Occasional links open 'pop-up' windows without informing the user that this will happen. This could be confusing for blind visitors, or those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability.

Plaid Cymru - www.plaidcymru.org

Ranking: **

This site also includes some barriers to accessibility:

All pages are clear and uncluttered and the text is sans serif - making reading much easier for many groups. Some links, however, have a shadow effect which may cause difficulties for some visitors with a vision or cognitive impairment or dyslexia.

Whilst the Text on every page can be resized by the user – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen, numerous Images of text and links have, however, been used in places meaning that the user cannot resize this text, or change its colour.

Many links are not underlined or otherwise indicated, making it difficult for visitors to tell which text is a link – important for general usability but especially for those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability. These last two groups will also find the scrolling text on the home page difficult to read and very distracting.

The colours used on the site always afford good contrast between text and background, except when a white on black colour scheme is imposed when some links become difficult to see.

The pages of this site are sub-divided into 'frames' (sections of the page which may scroll independently one from another). Frames are not handled well by some speaking and text-only browsers, as well as creating difficulties when the visitor wants to print or bookmark the page.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported the site still works fully - an essential feature for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Scottish Nationalist Party - www.snp.org

Ranking: ***

The SNP's website is one of those that meets a base level of accessibility – but still there are a few areas which may cause some visitors difficulties:

Pages are clear and uncluttered with sans serif text - which makes reading much easier for many groups. However, on pages other than the home page some text is a little

small under normal viewing conditions which may cause difficulties for some visitors with a vision impairment, dyslexia or who are viewing the site on a small screen.

A drop down menu uses a shadow effect which might cause difficulties for some visitors with a vision or cognitive impairment. Many links are also not underlined or otherwise indicated, making it difficult for visitors to tell which text is a link – important for general usability but especially for those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability.

Whilst some of the Text can easily be resized by the user (so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen) much of the text and links cannot.

The colours used on the site usually afford good contrast between text and background, however there are instances of links that are yellow text on a white background which will be very difficult for many visitors to read.

All images on the site are well labelled – so vital for blind visitors, someone using voice recognition software or a text only browser, or someone with dyslexia relying on speech.

The site uses “in-line frames” (a way of sectioning the page – usually to make inserting adverts easier). In-line frames cause problems for text-only browsers and speaking browsers used by blind visitors.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported alternative versions of the drop down menus appear, and all functions work - with the important exception of the online shop where the check out process ceases to function.

Sinn Fein - www.sinnfein.ie

Ranking: **

Sinn Fein’s website includes several significant issues that will present difficulties for many visitors who have an impairment:

Whilst the pages on this site have a lot of content, page elements are sufficiently separated with white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment and dyslexia. However, the choice of colours used on the site do not always afford good contrast between text and background which will make reading difficult for these same groups.

Although the text is sans serif (again assisting these groups) certain text and links are too small under normal viewing conditions. Also some fast scrolling text on the news page may cause difficulties for those with a vision or cognitive impairment.

Whilst the Text on every page can be resized by the user – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen, some text

overlaps when enlarged. Also some Images of text have been used in places meaning that the user cannot resize this text, or change its colour.

Text headings are properly coded so that blind users can get a summary of the page and quickly jump to the desired section.

Images on this site have appropriate text labels, assisting blind visitors and those with dyslexia who rely on speech output.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported the site still works, with the important exception of the online shop – thus excluding many visitors using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Social Democratic and Labour Party - www.sdlp.ie

Ranking: **

This website will also present difficulties for many of its visitors:

The pages of the SDLP site are clear and uncluttered with sans serif text - which makes reading much easier for many groups. News story text, however, is a little small under normal viewing conditions which may cause difficulties for some visitors with a vision impairment, dyslexia or who are viewing the site on a small screen.

Apart from headings, all the text on every page has been "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen. Images of text have also been used instead of actual text. This means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour.

Text headings are properly coded so that blind users can get a summary of the page and quickly jump to the desired section. Many links, however, are not underlined or otherwise indicated, making it difficult for visitors to tell which text is a link – important for general usability but especially for those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability.

In general the colours used on the site afford good contrast between text and background.

Many of the images and images that are also links on this site are unlabelled making it very difficult for a blind person, someone with dyslexia relying on speech output, or someone using voice recognition software to find their way around the website.

This site includes a Flash movie on the home page and its movement may distract those with a cognitive impairment. Despite recent improvements in the accessibility of

such page items, the vast majority of visitors who cannot use a mouse, are vision-impaired, or use speech output or voice recognition software will not be able to access this content.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported most of the site still functions as normal. However the drop down menus on the home page disappear – denying this functionality for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons. Even when JavaScript is supported those same drop down menus cannot be accessed by someone using the keyboard.

UK Independence Party - www.independenceuk.org.uk

Ranking: **

Although featuring an impressive accessibility section, the website of the UKIP also contains several shortcomings that will impede effective access for a number of groups:

The pages on this site are quite cluttered which may cause difficulties for those with a vision impairment or dyslexia. Whilst text is sans serif (making reading easier for these groups) certain text, such as that of the main stories, is too small under normal viewing conditions.

The text on every page has been "hard-coded" so that it will not automatically reflect a user's preferred size. There is, however, a text size picker on the home page which partially makes up for this shortcoming.

The colours used on the site usually afford good contrast between text and background, however, there are instances of pink text on a white background which will be difficult to read for those with a vision impairment or dyslexia.

Many of the links on this site are not underlined or otherwise indicated, making it difficult for visitors to tell which text is a link – important for general usability but especially for those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability.

Most of the images on this site have appropriate text labels, assisting blind visitors and those with dyslexia who rely on speech output.

With the minor exception of the 'Print Page' function, the site still works fully when those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported (including the online shop), - an essential feature for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Occasional links open 'pop-up' windows without informing the user that this will happen. This could be confusing for blind visitors, or those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability.

Ulster Democratic Unionist Party - www.dup.org.uk

Ranking: *

This site is given the lowest ranking of a single * as it includes many barriers to accessibility and usability for disabled visitors:

Whilst the pages on this site have a lot of content, page elements are sufficiently separated with white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment and dyslexia. However, much of the text is too small under normal viewing conditions and the choice of colours used on the site (such as blue links on a red background) do not always afford good contrast between text and background – both of which will make reading difficult for these same groups.

Whilst some of the text on the site resizes with the user's preference, much of the text has been "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen. Images of text have also been used instead of actual text including, importantly, the site's main menu. This means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour.

Some of the links are not underlined or otherwise indicated, making it difficult for visitors to tell which text is a link – important for general usability but especially for those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability. Whilst a keyboard user was able to tab through all links without difficulty it is not possible for them to choose from the list of candidates without the use of a mouse.

Many of the images on this site have not been labelled, making effective access very difficult for blind visitors and those with dyslexia who rely on speech output. There are also several moving and flashing images on the home page and at the top of every page which will be distracting for visitors with cognitive difficulties.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported most of the site still works with the exception of drop down lists – thus excluding from this functionality many visitors using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Ulster Unionist Party - www.uup.org

Ranking: **

This website includes several significant issues that will present difficulties for many visitors who have an impairment:

All pages are clear and uncluttered with sans serif text - which makes reading much easier for many groups. Some text, however, is small under normal viewing conditions which may cause difficulties for some visitors with a vision impairment, dyslexia or who are viewing the site on a small screen.

The text on every page has been "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or dyslexia. Images of text have also been used instead of actual text including, importantly, the main menu. This means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour.

Many links are also not underlined or otherwise indicated, making it difficult for visitors to tell which text is a link – important for general usability but especially for those with a cognitive impairment or learning disability.

In general the colours used on the site afford good contrast. However, there are some instances of orange text on a red background which will be difficult to read for some visitors with a vision impairment or dyslexia.

There are a number of unlabelled decorative images on this site which will cause difficulties for a blind person relying on speech output software.

The pages of this site are sub-divided into 'frames' (sections of the page which may scroll independently one from another). Frames are not handled well by some speaking and text-only browsers, as well as creating difficulties when the visitor wants to print or bookmark the page.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported the site still works fully - an essential feature for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Appendix A - Further Sources of Advice and Support

- www.abilitynet.org.uk

AbilityNet is able to offer information, advice and a range of services to help make a website accessible and usable for everyone – including accessibility audits, disabled end user testing, training, support, accessible web design and a Key Info Pack to get you started.

For further details please call Robin on 01926 312847 or email accessibility@abilitynet.org.uk

Other sources of help and information include:

- www.w3.org/TR/WAI-WEBCONTENT

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) is the body at the forefront of the development of standards in good design on the World Wide Web (including accessibility). The W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) form the basis of all other standards.

- www.w3.org/WAI/wcag-curric

This link will take you to a subsite of the W3C website which tries to explain in plainer terms, with examples of good and bad code, the W3C guidelines checkpoint by checkpoint.

- www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/e-government/resources/handbook/introduction.asp

The UK E-government Unit has guidelines on web accessibility (based upon the W3C guidelines). These can be viewed on-line or downloaded as an illustrated Word document.

- www.drc.org.uk

Organisations are legally obliged to provide websites that are accessible to disabled people. This site includes information on the DDA, its accompanying code of practice and their recently published report outlining the findings of research into the accessibility and usability of 1000 websites.

Appendix B – How We Decide the Ranking

The world standards in web accessibility (W3C WCAG) have prioritised their checkpoints into 3 priority levels. Compliance of your sites with these levels are phrased as - level 1 (highest) = “must”, level 2 = “should” and level 3 = “ought”.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) has meant that it has been law in the UK to have an accessible website since 1999. A site can only meet its legal requirement under the DDA if it is, at the very least, compliant with all level 1 checkpoints.

As it is only level 2 compliance which does not hinder some groups’ access (as defined by the W3C) it is our opinion that the true DDA requirement lies somewhere between levels 1 and 2 compliance.

***** Ranking**

We have chosen our *** (“Meets a base level of accessibility”) ranking as compliance with priority level 1 checkpoints as a prerequisite.

Further than that we look for significant (in our opinion based upon broad experience of working with disabled users) priority level 2 issues - such as the scalability of text, the avoidance of frames and any positive steps a site has taken to benefit visitors with an impairment (such as accessibility info or offering a choice of colour/text size schemes).

Note - It is our opinion that the addition of a Text only parallel site to the exclusion of addressing the accessibility/usability issues of the main site is neither necessary or in the spirit of inclusion or the W3C WCAG standards.

*** and ** Rankings**

We award * and ** to a site dependant upon how much it falls short of priority 1 compliance.

****** and ***** Rankings**

We award **** and ***** to a site dependant upon how much it exceeds priority 1 compliance.

For any further clarification please contact accessibility@abilitynet.org.uk

Appendix C – Statements of Commitment to Accessibility

Conservatives

"It is important to make web sites accessible to all users. The Conservative Party website at www.conservatives.com has been developed to comply with a minimum of level A conformance of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, but also satisfies many other checkpoints laid out in the Guidelines. We welcome feedback on how we can improve our website." - Sheridan Westlake, Editor, conservatives.com

Labour

"The Labour Party is an inclusive member-based organisation that prides itself on being accessible to all who share its values. We believe that it is important to make our website accessible to all potential users. With this in mind we have worked hard to improve the website for people with all disabilities and impairments.

We have ensured the availability of "alt text", a simple and clear approach to online layout and improved colour contrast. We have also facilitated the use of different browsers in a number of ways including the removal of frames from the site. Our site works well in text-only browsers and fits the criteria for people with visual impairment. Additionally, great care is taken when designing new pages to ensure that navigation is simple, links are accurate and images are clear. We try to ensure that articles on the site are written in plain English and avoid over-complicated sentences.

We hope that this makes the site accessible to as many users as possible but we recognise the need to continue to improve in this area." – from their website

Scottish Nationalist Party

"As Scotland's official opposition, we believe it is incumbent on us to provide a website which can be easily accessed and easily used by anybody regardless of abilities or disabilities. We are acutely aware that 1 in 4 households in Scotland have someone with a disability, whose votes are, of course, as important as anybody else's.

In 2005 we have completely redesigned and redeveloped www.snp.org and one of our primary concerns was to ensure that users with disabilities were able to access the website. We have completed stage one of the redevelopment and are currently implementing stage two so we don't have the final picture yet. What we do have is a website which aims to conform to the W3C XHTML 1.0 Transitional Standard and to meet level 2 of the W3C standard for accessibility. In real terms some examples of the additional functionality of the new website are as follows: a second plain HTML navigation menu hidden behind drop down menus so that browsers without java script capability are still easily able to navigate; a Preview facility for all documents which automatically converts to plain text; indexing of text of all PDFs into the database giving

full text searching of all documents; a hidden link which can only be seen by “readers” used by users with visual impairments, giving the option to “skip to contents”.

We are very well aware that no site is perfect and because people have a range of disabilities, it is always possible to overlook something. We will continually strive to improve our website but would invite any user who has improvements to suggest, to contact us by emailing anne.mclaughlin@snp.org - we will be more than happy to consider all suggestions." - Anne McLaughlin, Internal Communications Executive.

Liberal Democrats Party

“We take web accessibility (and wider accessibility issues) very seriously. Our website relaunch last month brought about a significant improvement on our previous site, but we acknowledge this is a continuing process and we will carry on working to further improve our site in this and future years.” – Mark Pack, Internet and Communications Officer.