



State of the eNation Reports

December 2006 – Utility and Switching Sites

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 utility companies (gas and electricity suppliers) as well as switching sites that inform the customer which suppliers offer best value. The sites reviewed are:

- British Gas
- Powergen
- Npower
- EDF energy
- Scottish Power
- Scottish and Southern
- Moneysupermarket
- Simplyswitch
- Switch with Which?
- USwitch

What level of access do these sites offer for the many millions of potential visitors who have a disability, dyslexia, literacy difficulty, or who simply find it a little difficult using a mouse?

Web Accessibility – why it's important

Today many services are only available, or offered at a discounted rate, on the Internet. Other sites 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 and 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 two 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):

- British Gas
- npower
- Which?

The Results in Summary

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

10 sites were reviewed: 2 sites had a *** ranking
6 sites had a ** ranking
2 sites had a * ranking

Site Ranking

- Scottish and Southern ***
- USwitch ***

- British Gas **
- EDF energy **
- Npower **
- Scottish Power **
- Simplyswitch **
- Switch with Which? **

- Powergen *
- Moneysupermarket *

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

The Results in Full

All sites were audited in October 2006 for accessibility and usability using a wide range of in-depth manual checks. The testing process was assisted by the accessibility testing tool AccMonitor, the AIS toolbar and colour checking tools.

Please note – Some websites also offer a ‘text only’ alternative. We will only comment upon the ‘text only’ site in those cases where it offers significantly improved accessibility to the main site. (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.)

British Gas – www.house.co.uk

Ranking: **

British Gas’ website is reasonably accessible, but still includes some issues that will cause significant difficulties for some of its visitors:

Pages on this site have a lot of content but page elements are sufficiently separated with white space and text is clear and just large enough under normal viewing conditions – an exception being footer links which critically include the accessibility help link. The site uses sans serif text which will assist visitors with a vision 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 have been used meaning that these cannot be resized, or have their colours changed.

Most of the colours on the site afford good contrast to help people with a vision impairment and avoid dangerous colour combinations for people who are colour blind. However the colours used in the main menu and in some images do not.

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. On this site almost every image, including most importantly images that are also links are properly labelled. Without these labels getting around the site would be very difficult - imagine trying to make a journey where signposts at every roundabout are left blank!

Many people are not able to use a mouse. British Gas’ website is able to be used with the keyboard alone. However it is quite difficult to see which is the active link when moving through the main menu items.

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. Critically this website fails to load when JavaScript is not supported (simply displaying the word 'Undefined' in the browser).

Powergen – www.powergen.co.uk

Ranking: *

Powergen's website includes many of the more significant issues with accessibility:

The home page is busy but not too cluttered, with sufficient use of white space to separate page elements. Other pages are less busy and still well spaced – assisting visitors with a vision impairment or dyslexia. However the text is small under normal viewing conditions.

The Text on every page has been 'hard coded' meaning it cannot easily be resized by many users – so vital for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen. The recently released browser Internet Explorer 7 and the Firefox browser can both overcome this issue (ignoring hard coded text) – however a significant number of users will be using other browsers which cannot.

Several of the colours on the site do not afford good contrast to help people with a vision or colour impairment – these include some link text and critically the footer text which includes a link to the accessibility help pages.

Whilst most images on this site have appropriate labels, some images are unlabelled or poorly labelled (such as "Corner image") which add significant auditory 'clutter' for blind users.

This site is able to be used fully with the keyboard alone. However the menu appears last in the tabbing order making it difficult for a keyboard user to reach it easily.

A number of 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.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported many links cease to function - as does the search and account log in. This will mean that a large number of users will effectively not be able to use the site at all.

npower – www.npower.com

Ranking: **

Npower's website is relatively accessible but still contains a number of issues:

The pages on this site are clean and relatively uncluttered, with page elements sufficiently separated by white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment or dyslexia. However, the text on this site is too small under normal viewing conditions.

Whilst the Text on every page is sans serif and 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, a number of images of text have been used meaning that these cannot be resized, or have their colours changed. Moreover the main 'npower' pinkish-red will cause some difficulties for people with a vision impairment.

The vast majority of images on this site are well labelled – so critical for blind users, dyslexic users relying on speech output, or someone using voice recognition software. However there are a number of images that are unlabelled.

The npower website is able to be used with the keyboard alone. However it is quite difficult to see which is the active link when moving through items with the pinkish-red background.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported critical functionality such as the account registration form cease to work – excluding those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons. Other forms on the site offer alternatives – but strangely not the account registration form.

EDF Energy – www.edfenergy.com

Ranking: **

The EDF website is similarly relatively accessible, yet will still present difficulties to many visitors for the following reasons:

Pages on this site a clean and uncluttered and page elements are sufficiently separated with white space. Text is large enough under normal viewing conditions – with notable exceptions being header and footer links which critically include the accessibility help link. The site uses sans serif text which will assist visitors with a vision 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, several images of text have been used meaning that these cannot be resized, or have their

colours changed. Moreover there are many instances of an orange and white colour combination which does not offer sufficient contrast to easily be read by visitors with a vision or colour impairment.

The page cannot be made narrower than 1024 pixels wide – meaning that many visitors who prefer a screen resolution of 800x600 that affords larger screen text will have to scroll left and right to read the pages in full.

There are numerous images (and images that are also links) that are unlabelled or poorly labelled – making the site very difficult to use for blind visitors and those with dyslexia relying on speech output, and someone using voice recognition software.

The site also conveys important content, such as special offers, in interactive presentations called “Flash Movies”. Despite recent improvements in the accessibility of such page items, many 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. Other visitors with a cognitive impairment will be distracted by their continual movement.

This site is generally able to be used with the keyboard alone. However it is not possible to see which is the active link when moving through the main menu items.

A number of 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.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported much of the site such as registration and log in still work fully – however critically the main menu items cease to function – excluding those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Scottish Power – www.scottishpower.co.uk

Ranking: **

The UK customer website of Scottish Power also does not meet a base level of accessibility and will cause difficulties for many visitors:

The pages on this site are busy but relatively uncluttered, with page elements sufficiently separated by white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment or dyslexia. The banner at the top of the page is, however, more cluttered and difficult to read.

Whilst the text used is sans serif (again assisting these groups) there are numerous instances of text in a handwriting style which will be less easy to read.

Links on the left of the page are too small under normal viewing conditions – as well as the link to the text only version of the site intended for users with a vision impairment. Moreover the text on the site 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. Also pictures of text have been used instead of actual text – this means that the user cannot resize it or change its colour.

Many of the text and background colour combinations across the site do not offer sufficient contrast to easily be read by visitors with a vision or colour impairment.

The vast majority of images (and images that are also links) on this site are well labelled – assisting blind visitors and those with dyslexia relying on speech output, and someone using voice recognition software. However a number have inappropriate labels of '*' and 'null'.

This site is able to be used fully with the keyboard alone and it is easy to see which is the active link at all times.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported much of the site still works fully; with the important exception of the log in function – excluding those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons. There is also scrolling text on the home page which may prove difficult to read – and which cannot be paused by visitors who are not able to take advantage of JavaScript.

Scottish and Southern – www.scottish-southern.co.uk

Ranking: ***

Scottish and Southern have a website that is quite accessible, with a few relatively minor issues:

All pages on this site are uncluttered with good use of white space to separate page elements – assisting those with a vision impairment or dyslexia.

The text used across the site is sans serif (again assisting these groups) but quite small under normal viewing conditions – with instances of very small text including the accessibility help link at the footer of the page. However, all of the text on the site can easily be resized (so vital for many visitors with a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen).

In general text and background colour combinations offer sufficient contrast - however there are instances where this is not the case, including the main menu, which may not easily be read by some visitors with a vision or colour impairment.

The vast majority of images on the site are well labelled, greatly facilitating blind visitors, someone using a text only browser, or someone with dyslexia relying on speech output. One notable exception is a text alternative to the map showing the location of all their power stations and shops etc.

This website is able to be used fully with the keyboard alone with the active link being relatively easy to see at all times.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported all aspects of this website seem to operate normally – so vital for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons. .

Money supermarket – www.moneysupermarket.com

Ranking: *

This website contains a number of the more significant barriers to accessibility that will impede effective access for a number of groups:

The pages on this site are busy and cluttered with little white space separating page elements– causing difficulties for some with a vision impairment or dyslexia.

Whilst the text on the site is sans serif, the text is small under normal viewing conditions which may make reading difficult for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen. Moreover, all text on this site has been "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – again causing difficulties for these groups. Also a number of images of text have been used meaning that these too cannot be resized, or have their colours changed.

There are instances of text and background colour combinations which do not offer sufficient contrast to easily be read by visitors with a vision or colour impairment. Importantly these include the main menu items.

The vast majority of images on this site are well labelled – so critical for blind users, dyslexic users relying on speech output, or someone using voice recognition software.

The site also conveys important content, such as special offers, in interactive presentations called “Flash Movies’. Despite recent improvements in the accessibility of such page items, many 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. The Flash movies also include movement, as do other forms of ads on the site, which can be distracting for those with a vision or cognitive impairment.

Although this site is able to be used with the keyboard alone it is quite difficult to see which is the active link when moving through links on every page.

A number of 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.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported key functionality such as the ability to search for electricity and gas suppliers cease to function. This will mean that a large number of users will effectively not be able to use the site at all.

SimplySwitch – www.simplyswitch.com

Ranking: **

This site is relatively accessible but nevertheless includes a number of issues that will present difficulties for many visitors with an impairment:

All pages on this site are clean and uncluttered with page elements sufficiently separated by white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment or dyslexia. The text used is sans serif (again assisting these groups) and generally of a decent size under normal viewing conditions – however there are instances of text that is too small to read easily.

The links to main sections are simply images with no accompanying text and in some cases these images are ambiguous. They do have a text label but this does not help keyboard or voice recognition users who are not hovering a mouse over the image and hence don't see these labels. The vast majority of images on the site are well labelled.

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, the page cannot be made narrower than 1024 pixels wide – meaning that many visitors who prefer a screen resolution of 800x600 that affords larger screen text will have to scroll left and right to read the pages in full.

There are a number of colour combinations used on the site which do not offer sufficient contrast to easily be read by visitors with a vision or colour impairment.

The SimplySwitch website is able to be used fully with the keyboard alone, although the active link could be made more visible.

A number of 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.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported some important functionality like the postcode search cease to function – making it impossible to use for

those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Switch with Which? - www.which.co.uk/switch

Ranking: **

The switching section of the Which? website also contains a number of issues which means it falls short of a base level of accessibility:

The pages on this site are clear, focussed and uncluttered, with page elements sufficiently separated by white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment or dyslexia. Whilst some text is sans serif a number of pages include serif text (which may cause difficulties for these groups).

Most of the text is too small under normal viewing conditions, and there are instances of very small text (such as the notification of price increases) which may make reading difficult for many visitors who have a vision impairment or who are viewing the site on a small screen. Moreover, all text on this site has been "hard-coded" so that a user cannot easily make it larger – again causing difficulties for these groups. A facility has been provided to alter the text size at the bottom of each page, but this requires the use of JavaScript.

Most of the colours on the site afford good contrast to help people with a vision impairment and avoid dangerous colour combinations for people who are colour blind. However there are instances of mid blue text on a light blue background which will prove very difficult to read for many visitors.

The vast majority of images on this site are well labelled – so critical for blind users, dyslexic users relying on speech output, or someone using voice recognition software. However a number of images of text have been used meaning that these too cannot be resized, or have their colours changed.

This site is able to be used fully with the keyboard alone and the highlight on the active link is extremely well defined.

With the exception mentioned above, when those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported all aspects of this site continue to function normally – so vital for those visitors using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

USwitch - www.uswitch.com

Ranking: ***

This site meets our criteria for minimum accessibility for only the following issues:

The pages on this website are clear and uncluttered with page elements sufficiently separated by white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment or dyslexia. The text used is sans serif (again assisting these groups) but slightly small under normal viewing conditions.

The page cannot be made narrower than 1024 pixels wide – meaning that many visitors who prefer a screen resolution of 800x600 that affords larger screen text will have to scroll left and right to read the pages in full.

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 a small number of images of text meaning that these cannot be resized, or have their colours changed.

Most of the colours on the site afford good contrast to help people with a vision impairment and avoid dangerous colour combinations for people who are colour blind. However there are a number of instances of text colours that do not.

This site is able to be used fully with the keyboard alone, but the active link could be slightly better highlighted.

A number of links open 'pop-up' windows without informing the user that this will happen.

Despite a message informing the user that JavaScript is required, in our testing the site still appears to work fully when JavaScript is not supported - 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/web

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 range of useful resources.

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. Arguably 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.

This said, it has been our experience that many sites that meet level 1 and even level 2 priority checkpoints can nevertheless still present significant difficulties for disabled visitors in practice.

This can be due to a number of reasons. For example, over-reliance on purely visual clues to guide the user (leaving blind users without vital clues about where the designer intends the user’s ‘eye’ to be drawn), small or closely clustered links or buttons (causing those with fine motor control difficulties to miss what they intended to click on - or click on the wrong thing), lack of proper separation of page objects (meaning that users with vision or cognitive difficulties can miss important items which are not sufficiently separated from neighbouring content), the sheer bulk and complexity of links and sections on a page (making those who’s access technology or methodology is slow become frustrated or give up) or a host of other reasons.

Similarly a site that falls short of priority 1 or 2 compliance in a number of respects can nevertheless be very accessible and usable by the vast majority of disabled visitors in practice.

This can be due to the fact that particular checkpoints are only contravened very rarely (still denying the site level 1 compliance but having very little impact on a disabled users overall experience of the site), or because checkpoints that are contravened more widely only impact upon a very small number of users.

Thus we have tried to reflect the overall user experience of a site when deciding its ranking.

***** Ranking**

We have chosen our *** (“satisfies a base level of accessibility”) ranking as compliance (or near compliance where the shortfall has little evident impact on users) with priority level 1 checkpoints.

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 our definition of *** ranking.

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

We award **** and ***** to a site dependant upon how much it exceeds our definition of *** ranking.

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

Appendix C – Statements of Commitment to Accessibility

British Gas

"British Gas is committed to ensuring our products, services and communications are accessible to all. In 2006 we have undertaken a significant Customer Service Improvement Programme which includes dedicated investment to improve many aspects of our web presence. This investment will overhaul the current British Gas website www.house.co.uk to ensure it meets the needs of all visitors through the practical application of W3C Double A compliance standards. This will result in immediate improvements to the user experience as well as providing a solid platform for future enhancements as we strive to achieve the highest level of compliance, W3C Triple A."

Mark Godfrey, Head of Content, British Gas Online

Npower

"npower is confident and proud that our web systems are compliant with the current code of practise all our web systems are at least AA compliant"

Kelly Brown, Public Relations, npower

Which?

"Which? takes the issue of website accessibility seriously. We firmly believe in inclusivity and recognise the importance of enabling as many people as possible to use our sites. We are working to improve accessibility for our Switch with Which? site. This work forms part of an ongoing organisational review of our standards, processes and testing procedures. We welcome the AbilityNet review as this will help us to ensure that the improvements we continue to make will be meaningful and based on the use of expert review and user testing. Which? aims to make improvements that make a real difference to existing and future users of our sites."

spokesperson for Switch with Which?

SimplySwitch

"Our website can be viewed in a number of different text sizes. Also, our freephone number is clearly visible on our website. Consumers can phone in, speak to a fully trained advisor and switch over the telephone."

Alistair Neale, Head of Media Relations, simply switch