Robin: So I am here with Abi of AbilityNet, but she's so much more than that. Abi, do you want to introduce yourself?

Abi James: Thank you, Robin. Yeah. I'm an accessibility consultant where the AbilityNet, which is a great opportunity to go and work with organizations trying to improve their accessibility, but I also work outside of the charity looking at the policy implications for accessibility, so how we actually work with organizations and at a government level and an international level. How do we get these great accessibility standards embedded in our laws and our standards and actually just making everybody have the expectation of accessible websites wherever they go.

Robin: So think of a really busy person and double it and then add on a little bit more and that's Abi's life basically. Now you're going to be on the one of the expert panels that's going to be about regulation to deal with accessibility. No, actually, it's going to be super engaging for some really good reasons. Yeah. Do you want to tell us about what you're going to bring to this panel?

Abi James: I'm really looking forward to being part of this puzzle, just to be in the room because we've got some great experts, people from government universities, from the corporate sector as well, and we're going to be talking about public sector regulations, web accessibility regulations.

As you say, the law, you sometimes hit your head against the brick ball wall when you try and read these regulations. People thinking, "Oh well, we don't want compliance, culture, etc." But we have a great opportunity at the moment because, for the first time in the UK and actually across Europe, we have laws that require certain organizations, just the public sector at the moment, to comply with web accessibility standards or work towards those standards. But also really, really critical is they've got to put that information on their websites and say what they're doing about accessibility and how they're going to help their users.

So actually, yes it's boring law stuff, but from the perspective of an assisted technology user, like myself, like you, the first time ever we can go to a website, go to our local council, go to our schools, go to our universities, go to our hospitals, look on a particular page and go, "Actually, I'm going to have a problem with trying to access the information, but look, there's an email address, there's a person I can contact and they can give me help because that's what's part of all these regulations."

For the first time, organizations have to think about their accessibility, say how they comply, say how they will help people who have difficulties, and then there is that bit of that stick as well of actually if you do have problems, who to go to in the government and get support, make a complaint, and potentially we've got a route to make sure that those organizations do comply with these regulations going forward.

Robin: Absolutely. And yeah, whilst legislation isn't necessarily a super interesting topic, it's, to date, it's been a limp twig at best rather than a big knobbly stick, which would compliment the rare juicy carrots that we talk about as well and I'm really hoping it's going to shift the needle, and we're actually seeing that, aren't we, in the public sector? There is actually an impact already. Two decades after, arguably, the legislation to do with website accessibility has come into effect. We're actually now seeing a shift in the landscape because of this very legislation.

Abi James: Yeah, it's just we're now having those conversations. People are actually starting to go to their senior managers, they're going to the chairs, they go to their boards and saying, "We've got to take accessibility seriously." This is why I'm also, like we'll hopefully have in the room doing the panel, we'll have people who are willing and able to share their practice and share their questions, share their experience. We've got to learn from each other.

My comment I will make it anytime I talk about accessibility is it's a journey, it's never complete because technology changes, let alone getting all those ticks in that compliance standards. It's always going to change. It's always something you've got to be striving to do better at. And these regulations are part of getting people to be open about their accessibility and open about what they can and can't do, all start in those conversations, which is great.

Robin: Absolutely. And having that accessibility page, which people on the face of it, that's the only kind of headline they've heard, they might think, "Oh, well, that's just an easy thing to do," and how that's half the job done. But actually, that page, what's required there, is very stringent, it's very exacting, and it actually includes an awful lot of work prior to being able to publish a compliant accessibility statement, including finding out just how bad your site is and actually having to do something about it.

Abi James: Yeah, absolutely. There's a sample accessibility statement that the government has published, so you have to follow that in that you have to give layman description of what that means, so what support is in your website, can you zoom it, can you use it with a keyboard. You have to give details of alternative formats where it's not accessible and you have to say what you are going to do to fix the problems you've identified so that ... and it's quite a formulaic statement. And actually what we're finding with the organizations we're working from is it's actually a good starting point to actually say, "Have you thought about all these things?" Go away. The question I so frequently ask [inaudible 00:00:05:34], "Do you know in your organization who deals with the complaints about accessibility issues on your website?" People really need to be thinking about those processes internally just as much as the technical side of making sure their documents, their website are all accessible. Because that's the other thing, this isn't just websites, this is all the documents on the websites as well.

Robin: Absolutely. Now there are exceptions, if you've got a massive archive of documents, then you start eating that elephant one nibble at a time in a sensible priority order, et cetera, et cetera. But yeah, I mean, we are seeing movement finally, thankfully. We had a really interesting interview with George Rhodes, who's on a massive project of reviewing all of the public sectors, websites and looking at their accessibility statements and seeing how comprehensive they are, how compliant they are, and how much the reality of the accessibility of the site and question is reflected in that statement and sometimes there's a huge mismatch there. So yeah, there's a long way to go, but it's definitely shifting the needle.

Abi James: So again, conversation about accessibility has been really great. We've been collaborating with George. It came about through a working group the university sector set up to start to think about web accessibility regulations, and obviously they've got responsibilities around disabled students already, so it came from people involved in that area, and George got involved in his role in local government. And actually now, starting with the university sector as a core, but we support anybody who will come and talk to us about the regulations, we're creating resources and sharing best practice, and his research is brilliant, but we need to engage other sectors.

This is schools, they have a partial exemption, but they need to be meeting these regulations as well, the whole of the the NHS sector, so not just hospitals and trusts, but doctors, surgeries, anybody who is publicly funded and under public law, local governments, parish councils I've heard people working with, not just our standard gov.uk central government websites. So there's lots of sectors out there that are only just finding out that this is a legal requirement for them. This is already in place. It's been there for over 12 months. There are timelines that are ticking away. They should already be publishing these statements, but people are talking about it. I've done some work with museums as well.

There's lots of people who are really engaged by this opportunity and sharing best practice and not just in tech share pro, but AbilityNet is doing series of webinars, fact sheets as well, to get people to understand what they have to do, but also what they can potentially do off the back of this as well on how much better this can be for ultimately the people coming to them using their services, accessing their digital resources because society is now so digital. We are all reliant on accessing online resources, online documents just to be part of society.

Robin: Brilliant and thank goodness that the B-word, Brexit, didn't put paid to the UK government bringing this EU legislation into UK law because we're seeing some improvement, which is brilliant.

Abi James: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, yeah, the B-word does come up, but this is UK though. It's on our statute, but it's not going away. But our you [inaudible 00:09:07] are are also doing this, so it's a great opportunity to learn from them and to collaborate from them and that will be part of tech share pro. I'm really looking forward to that as well. It's actually on an international scale, learning from other people as well.

Robin: Brilliant. Looking forward to the event and to hearing you speak along with everybody else. Thank you, Abi.

Abi James: Thanks Robin.