George Rhodes: Hello, my name is George Rhodes. I was formerly the digital accessibility compliance lead at Kent County Council and I've just recently started a new role as an accessibility consultant at the home office.

Interviewer: Great, and you've very kindly shared some of your research results in the context of the new public sector body's digital accessibility regulations that came into force in the UK on the 23rd of September. Would you be able to provide a brief overview of the research you've been undertaking and why you felt the research was needed?

George Rhodes: Yeah, sure thing. So, this was a personal project. I didn't really do this in association with either my new job or my old one. Originally, this started out as a question for myself, really just sort of see where we were at with accessibility statements across the UK because I was involved in my previous role with trying to support many of the local authorities in Kent in preparing for the new regulations. I had some time on my hands and wanted to sort of see where everyone else was getting to across the UK.

So, I had a few initial questions that I wanted to answer. How many statements are out there? What different approaches had been taken? And does the presence and quality of an accessibility statement correlate at all with a more accessible site? Does the number of statements in existence, and how compliant they are with the new regulations, demonstrate uptake? And also one of the things I did was map where I found statements because I wanted to see if there were any geographical areas that sort of demonstrate hotspots for accessibility.

Interviewer: And briefly, what were the actual findings? Some people that are listening to the podcast might not have read the blog yet, so if you could just share the top line results.

George Rhodes: So, I've recently just updated the results, so we've got a version two and the original results, which were taken as a snapshot prior to the first deadline of the regulations. So, this work was completed over late August, early September. I looked at 601 accessibility statements or rather public sector websites. Some didn't have accessibility statements. Those covered all local government in the UK, both county and or district/power level, all the police forces, fire and rescue services and universities in the UK, so I have close to 601.

We only had around 23 I think it was, 23 compliance statements, which is less than 4%. 148 of those had some form of partially compliant statement, which could range from quite literally a page titled Accessibility, which had only a very small statement there saying we've tried, and so here is how to contact us, all the way up to a really good attempt that had clearly had some work put into it to try and provide supporting information for users that might be having an issue. And then there were around 430, which were that sort of poor level where there wasn't much effort or no statement at all. So, that that was about 72% of all of the ones that we looked at that really were not up to scratch or useful to most users, we felt.

For the version two, which I completed yesterday as of recording this podcast. We, well, I say we, I've now looked at 100 and [inaudible 00:04:17] 1,441 public sector websites, which comprise again all of the local governments, ones that I had already looked at, all of the police forces, fire and rescue service, universities, but now also include all colleges, so further education and also all NHS organizations that I could find, which brought that total up by another 800 or so.

We've had some quite interesting results out of those actually. We're now up to 109 compliance statements, which is about 7.6% of the total. We've seen a comparative drop in the number of good and partial attempt statements, a little increase in the number of poor statements. So, now we're up to 669 poor attempts and 487 organizations with no statement whatsoever, which makes up about a third of all statements.

Interviewer: And so, some work to be done.

George Rhodes: Yes, quite. But, we have seen some really good things come out of this as well. Since the first deadline that's occurred, local government, particularly has jumped from 16 to 44 compliance statements, so people are starting to get the message.

Police is a particularly good example. Where police forces and now moving to a national standard template for police forces, they have a prepared accessibility statement. So, they've moved from no compliant police forces prior to the deadline to 15 within a couple of weeks afterwards, so that's really good to see. They're up to 15 out of 48 police forces I looked at. So, they've made a really massive jump.

Interviewer: Great, and within the blog, the original research, you mentioned some of the accessibility fails and also you also noted that there were some poor results that you had found in your second set of results. Would you like to share any of those?

George Rhodes: Yeah, so I remember in the blog that we've already published, we shared a couple of my sort of favorite love to hate kind of examples. There were a couple that are really short and sweet, which in effect say, we've built the websites to be accessible. If there is any other problem, it's with you and your browser. Those ones are all too common.

I know we addressed one that starts off with the title, I Am Blind and then uses an image with circles drawn on it to direct the user to be able to use their assistive technology, which obviously doesn't really prove very useful for a blind user since the image had alt text.

But, there are a few new sort of bad examples I think I'd like to pick out. I've seen ones that have very large images of text in a number of different languages, which was their contact info in about 15 different languages as one vast image of poor quality and no alt text.

I've seen organizations say they will specifically not publish a statement, which they may want to reconsider considering the legal obligations. Since some of them are very, very outdated, particularly across the NHS, I won't name any particular names, but as a sector, I've seen many a statements that references the browser Netscape and how to update that. Netscape having died off around 2008, so particularly outdated there. I've seen statements that are listed as being updated in 2013 with known issues that still exists on their website, so having not done anything about those for six years.

I've seen statements, which still have the, Insert Email Address Here section in where they were trying to say how to contact them, so really not taking much care about this quite important information that they're trying to provide. And many, many dismissive one-liners as I said, where they say they've done everything that they can and it's up to the user to update their browser, or they need to learn how to change the text size, or color contrast is a very common set of suggestions.

But overall, I think we are moving in the correct direction. People are starting to get the message and another 80 or so compliance statements within a month of the two separate checks that I've done is a good move. It's just there is a lot that still needs to be done and I think there is a lot of them, a lot of promotional work that needs to be done in getting people to understand what they need to do to meet regulatory compliance.

Interviewer: Do you have any suggestions for resources for where people that are looking to make adjustments to their accessibility statements can go?

George Rhodes: So, there is two resources I'd probably direct people to. First, there is the GDS sample accessibility statement. I think that's a good place to start. I would advise people to really make sure that they're tailoring that to their needs rather than just copy and pasting it.

One of the things I've also seen, which I haven't mentioned up until now is when people publish a compliance statement based on the GDS wording or otherwise, they have a responsibility to point out where they have deemed work to be a disproportionate burden.

Within the GDS example, they provide a disproportionate burden example paragraph, which makes mention of the [WCAG 00:11:17], a point about skip to content. I would really not consider that a disproportion burden to fix. And I've seen a number of compliance statements that have effectively copied that directly from GDS. I really don't know how they might have judged that to be a disproportionate burden, but that and other examples should really just point to be very, very careful when you're talking about disproportionate burden and make sure you're tailoring any template you're using to your specific website.

The other resource I would advise is a bit of a plug for something we've done, I'm afraid. Myself and other colleagues, and some of which are from AbilityNet have collectively written a digital accessibility tool kit, which can be found at lexdis.org.uk. Within that, we've addressed a large number of points, procurement within accessibility, accessibility statements, the new regs and timelines, a whole host of things. But, there is some accessibility statement guidance there, some of the templates we've used and more information on this research that we've been talking about.

Interviewer: Fantastic. Those sound like really useful resources for anybody looking into this and of course, we've got information on the AbilityNet website as well. You will soon be speaking at a Tech Share Pro Conference on higher education and public sector accessibility with our esteemed colleague, Abby James, who is an experienced higher education accessibility expert among other things and also Paul Smith who is head of digital accessibility at Barclay's and Alistair McNaught, formerly of Jisc. Do you have any suggestions of the types of topics that you'll be covering as part of your panel?

George Rhodes: I know there is a number of questions that are continuing to circulate, and myself, Abby and Alistair certainly have discussed these in the past. I'm sure on the day a number of things that will come up will be discussions around substantial revision of websites and how that affects timelines to meet the regulations, particularly for virtual learning environments. Disproportionate burden, again, I'm sure is another one that will come up.

One that I'd like to see come up more would be the discussion about how the new accessibility regulations are intermingling with existing copyright law. That's one that's sort of mulling about at the moment, particularly when we're discussing things such as E-book libraries and other subscription to content services. So, I know higher education is particularly talking about that.

Another one, final one would probably be about prioritizing sites, particularly for large organizations that have massive web estates, how they're going about prioritizing what to address first and what metrics they're using to try and inform that? That's another topic I'd like to see discussed.

Interviewer: Thanks very much, George, for your time. We'll look forward to seeing the panel at the Tech Share Pro at the end of November.

George Rhodes: Thank you.