



State of the eNation Reports July 2005 – Telecoms

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's telecoms companies.

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 visitors 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 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 several weeks 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):

- Vodafone
- Kingston Communications
- Onetel
- Telewest
- O₂

Telecoms Websites – in summary

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

10 sites were reviewed: 2 sites had a **** ranking
1 site 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.

British Telecom - www.bt.com

Ranking: ***

BT's website meets a base level of accessibility according to our reckoning. Nevertheless it still has issues that will hinder some visitors from being able to gain effective access:

With the notable exception of the site map page the pages on bt.com are uncluttered, with page elements sufficiently separated by white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment and dyslexia. The text used is sans serif (again assisting these groups) and of a decent size under normal viewing conditions.

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, however, been used (including main navigation links) meaning that the user cannot resize this text, or change its colour. Also on the contact us page images of text for the login were italicised and their design and colour will make them impossible to read for many in these groups.

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, with very few exceptions, have been labelled well.

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.

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. Bt.com doesn't load at all in the specialist browser 'Home Page Reader'.

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).

Whilst bt.com has a section of the site that is designed with accessibility in mind featuring their products for disabled users, the visitor is often lead away from it back to the main site. It is important that all areas of the site be accessible.

NTL – www.ntl.com

Ranking: **

NTL's website includes several issues that will present significant difficulties for disabled visitors:

Although pages on this site seem quite busy, page elements are sufficiently separated by white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment and dyslexia. The text used is sans serif (again assisting these groups) and of a decent size under normal viewing conditions.

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 for the main navigation meaning that the user cannot resize this text, or change its colour. These images include text which is small – smaller than normal page text.

All images on the site are well labelled – so vital for blind visitors, someone using a text only browser, or someone with dyslexia relying on speech output. There are, however, several moving advert images which will be distracting for visitors with cognitive difficulties.

Users of screen reading software pull all links on a page into a list - to more quickly access the link they want. Many links on the site do not make sense when read out of context in this way, such as 'More', 'Read more' and 'Click here'.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported several important features cease to function such as the quicklinks drop down box - the only apparent way to get to the special needs section of the site. Crucially details of the special needs helpline are only available in this section and are not included in the main contact us page.

A keyboard user will find it very difficult to see which link is active when tabbing through the main navigation links, and it is also impossible to use the quicklinks drop down from the keyboard.

Telewest – www.telewest.co.uk

Ranking: **

Telewest's website also has a number of issues that will make it difficult for many visitors:

The pages on this site are uncluttered, with page elements sufficiently separated by white space – facilitating those with a vision impairment and dyslexia. The text used is sans serif (again assisting these groups) and of a decent size under normal viewing conditions.

However, 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.

Furthermore, many of these images of text, and some images that are also links, are unlabelled or poorly labelled making it very difficult for a blind person, someone with dyslexia relying on speech output, or someone using voice recognition software to access the link – an advertising image on the home page featuring an offer including 6 months free digital TV is simply labelled "banner" depriving these groups from taking advantage of this offer. Some of these advert images also include movement which will be distracting for visitors with cognitive difficulties.

Many links on the site do not make sense when read out of context by screen reader users, such as 'Click here' and 'here'.

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.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported you are still able to add items to your shopping cart but are then unable to proceed to the check-out – effectively excluding those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons.

Onetel – www.onetel.co.uk

Ranking: ****

It is evident that accessibility and usability have been considered in the design and implementation of Onetel’s website leading to a very unusual ** ranking:**

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

The site uses stylesheets – a way of separating the content of a website from how it is presented. Such an approach makes it possible for the site to be viewed differently depending upon which technology you use to access it. When styles are unsupported the page layout is ‘linearised’, or decolumnised, with helpful links provided to skip to sections of the page.

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 very few instances of text that does not.

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 output.

Very 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.

Those mini programs called JavaScript are used very sparingly on this site – and all features including the online shop still function when they are unsupported.

Very unusually the HTML code of this website validates to recognised standards – making a variety of access technologies and browsers work more successfully.

Kingston Communications – www.kcom.com

Ranking: ****

Kingston Communication's website gets a very unusual ** ranking – with only a few accessibility issues:**

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

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, a number of Images of text and links have, however, been used in places meaning that the user cannot resize this text, or change its colour.

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 output. There are, however, several moving advert images which will be distracting for visitors with cognitive difficulties.

A number of links on the site do not make sense when read out of context by screen reader users, such as 'Read more'.

When those mini programs called JavaScript are not supported an unnecessary message appears informing the user that the site still works fully - appearing on every page and filling approximately half the screen at lower screen resolutions. We concur that the site's appearance and functionality is unaffected when JavaScript is unsupported – so vital for those using older browsers, those with vision impairments using some special browsers, and those whose organisations disable JavaScript for security reasons. It is worth noting, however, that this site does not have ecommerce functionality

Very unusually the HTML code of this website validates to recognised standards – making a variety of access technologies and browsers work more successfully.

Vodafone – www.vodafone.co.uk

Ranking: **

Vodafone's website includes a number of obstacles that will present difficulties for many visitors who have an impairment:

